

BACCANO!

2001 The Children of Bottle

RYOHGO
NARITA





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ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



Revenge. There was nothing else in Sylvie's eyes.

When we stopped off that ship, if I had said I felt no hatred for Szilard, I would have been lying. However, although Master Maiza had lost his younger brother, the blaze in that young lady's eyes fit the role of a sister.

When Szilard betrayed us, Sylvie had seemed ready to end her own life, but... Master Elmer and Master Maiza had talked her around, and she seemed to have calmed herself. However, I saw it in place of Grief, quiet flames had filled her eyes.

"Sylvie, please don't brood like that. For his sake as well."

"I know... It's all right—I'm all right."

When Master Maiza spoke to her, Sylvie nodded, smiling, but her eyes didn't change in the slightest.

When we disembarked, she must have noticed me watching her. She murmured in a voice no one around us could hear. Her wide-open eyes seemed to be on the verge of tears, yet they were filled with a rage as strong as an Asura demon's.

"Mr. Denkuro... Will these feelings disappear someday? In the midst of a long, long time like eternity, will this anger fade in the end?"

THE GIRL CALLED SYLVIE LUMIERE, IMMORTAL ACCORDING TO TOUGOU DENKURO (IMMORTAL, PERMANENT PART-TIMER)

I thought I should say something to her, but as I hesitated, Sylvie's eyes grew even sharper, and she spoke adamantly.

"If so, then I don't need an eternity."

She was, without a doubt, iron sheathed in velvet. However, because of the strength of her glare, I was unable to doubt her words. I had never seen anyone so determined to live. If so, I wonder just how much we shall change over the course of this long time.

Nearly three hundred years have passed since then. I came to a town where I'd heard there was a songstress who resembled her, but... I arrived just a little too late and was informed that she had left with an individual who may have been Master Maiza. I was told that she had been very recently released from a long, long stay in a wanderer once again through foreign lands. Also, when will I next return to this country of my birth?



[Please don't readmitted.]

I will leave out my personal opinion of the subject known as "Nile." I have determined that the content of the statements of the subject's statements on his humanity may be generally understood.

Statement 1
"I was living. It is for that purpose. I was found and was given the name of my mother, the great river. The geologist who picked me up never gave me a surname. That is why I cannot call him my father."

RECORD REGARDING NILE, IMMORTAL (EXCERPTS) DRAFTED BY VICTOR TALBOT (IMMORTAL, AFFILIATED WITH THE FBI)

Statement 2
"Having gained immortality, I gradually fell prey to an intense fear. I was afraid that having become deathless, I would soon forget the concept of others' deaths as well... I would soon need to ward, changed through battle, in all times and all places, constantly keeping death close to me... Even if it would never visit itself upon me."

Statement 3
"Years passed, and before me lay—corpses. Mountains of them. Let me just say this: It was a sight I had seen countless times before, but I was unable to protect those on the battlefield called companions and had allowed them to meet their deaths. It struck me. At this point, being immortal had caused me no pain whatsoever. The real pain would no doubt come when all but I had perished, and my surroundings were completely shrouded in darkness."

"No change. Nothing had changed. I had considered the misfortune of immortality to be the fact that all of your loved ones died before you did. However, I was wrong. There was no change. I had considered the misfortune of immortality to be the fact that I would never see my loved ones again. I was wrong. I had considered the sorrow of bereavement had nothing to do with how many times it happened. It was the same every time."

However, there was one thing that had changed: my appearance. I howled at my own powerlessness. I thought my heart was overflowing with rage or overwhelmed with grief.

"But... my face, reflected in the surface of the lake, was nearly expressionless. An indifferent mask... as if I did not care that I was dead and alone in the theater of war. That I would not forget death, so that I would remain human, would grow accustomed to death instead. And so... I am afraid. Afraid of seeing my own face."

The subject, who visited me during the Cold War, delivered his statements in an exhausted voice and then departed. I made no attempt to detain him. I merely smiled and watched him go. In other words, submitting this report would endanger my position. I am sorry, from this point on, I will not be able to provide a more detailed account of the subject's statements. I deal with this. That blasted... [The rest is a string of complaints regarding the director general of the FBI.]

"Say, Miria. We, uh... We don't seem to be aging. Am I just imagining that?"

"....."

"My gosh, you're right!"

"...Hmm. I don't know how this happened, but if nothing changes, we'll end up watching everybody who's important to us die. You know what I mean; it comes up on TV all the time. How people who live forever are actually the most miserable, that sort of thing."

"I'd hate that..."

"It's okay! Look, Miria, just think: You'll lose several people you love to death even if you're living normally, right?"

"Uh-huh... That's true."

"Besides, if we just keep moaning about how miserable we are, it's not fair to the people who died, see? I mean, if you're sad that somebody's dead, it means they gave you so much time to enjoy with them while they were alive!"

"....."

"I hear that in Asia, they ring bells one hundred and eight times on New Year's so people will reincarnate. It's called Bounnou! Sounds like 'born' and 'know'... In other words, 'Know you're going to be born'! So we shouldn't just focus on the people who are dying. We need to look forward, to the people who are going to be born!"

".....I see! That way, the sadness and the happiness will cancel each other out, and everything will just be normal!"

"That's right! In other words, I say we treasure our future meetings even more than before!"

"Wow, Isaac! You're absolutely right!"

"As a physical display of our resolution, let's put one hundred and eight bells on our clothes!"

"That's fifty-four each!"

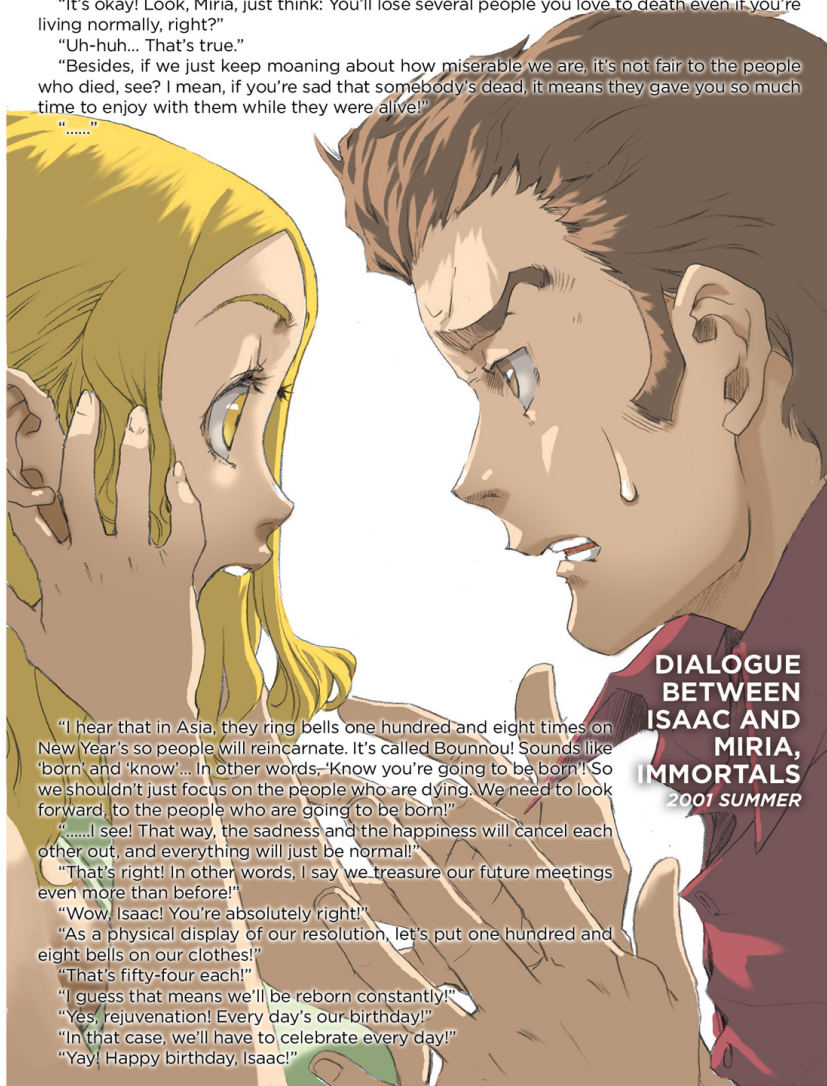
"I guess that means we'll be reborn constantly!"

"Yes, rejuvenation! Every day's our birthday!"

"In that case, we'll have to celebrate every day!"

"Yay! Happy birthday, Isaac!"

**DIALOGUE
BETWEEN
ISAAC AND
MIRIA,
IMMORTALS
2001 SUMMER**



BACCANO!

2001 The Children of Bottle

VOLUME 5

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**


NEW YORK

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BACCANO!, Volume 5: 2001 THE CHILDREN OF BOTTLE
RYOHGO NARITA

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February 2003
In a certain place

Hey.

You people look like you're enjoying yourselves.

Even if Valentine's Day is just around the corner, those are some pretty weird duds. Wearing bells all over... You'll drive yourselves nuts.

Huh. So that's why you're dressed like that. That's pretty optimistic.

Y'know, you remind me of that guy.

Happy Ending. That was his nickname. You could stick a *Mr.* in front of that, or maybe make it *The Happy Ending*. Just trick it out somehow so that it sounds cool. As long as you've got *Happy Ending* in there, he'll probably be satisfied.

Yeah, he's a weird one. The only thing on his radar is other people's happiness... And he doesn't care whether the person seeking happiness is a good guy or a bad one.

What about him? If you're asking whether he's happy or not... I bet even he doesn't know. If we're dividing people into good guys and bad ones, though, he's definitely bad. No doubt about it.

That's a contradiction? No it isn't, not at all. It's not as if people who wish for happiness are always good guys.

...You want to hear more? More of this drifter's idle talk?

Ha-ha. Say, thanks.

Let's see. I've got some time before my friends get back, so I guess I could talk until then.

It was... Yeah, it was about three hundred years ago now, on a certain ship...

PROLOGUE
SMILE JUNKIE

PROLOGUE

SMILE JUNKIE

1711

On the Atlantic Ocean

The *Advena Avis*

“Dammit! Wake up! Wake uuuup! Everyone’s gonna die! We’ll all be killed— *Aah!* AAAAAAAAAAAAAaAka-ka-kaaaAAAAh! AAAAAaaaah! AaaAaaah! Aaah! Aaah...”

An uproar engulfed the ship.

In the darkness...all they heard were screams.

The alchemists had left their homelands and were bound for the New World.

And on that ship, at long last, they’d successfully summoned a demon.

With that, they’d achieved what was generally considered one of alchemy’s ultimate goals: immortality.

However, that immortality had a troublesome restriction...

There was one way for them to die: Find another immortal and have that person place a hand upon their head. Then the other simply had to think, forcefully, *I want to eat*. By doing this, they could give all their knowledge, memories, and experiences—and sometimes even their personality—to the other. They could deal death to themselves and allow the other to inherit all the accomplishments of the life they’d left behind.

However, naturally, some of them had thought about this from the other direction. In fact, the restriction made more sense when considered in that light.

One could inherit all the others’ experiences and become an immortal *king*.

On the next night after the demon had been summoned, a man plunged down that road toward everlasting solitude.

He ate the companions who’d studied alchemy alongside him, throwing the ship into infernal pandemonium.

The man’s name was

"It's Szilard! The filthy old bastard—he's betrayed us!"

"That wretch... Stop him! Somebody stop him! No, I don't care who does it—*eat him!*"

"Where did he go?! He must still be on the ship!"

"Careful! He's already eaten more than five of us! He won't move the way he did before!"

As angry roars filled the ship, one shadow was attempting to hide in the hold.

She was a bespectacled girl with silver hair, sixteen or seventeen years old. She seemed clearly out of place, and...

Scared, I'm scared. Hide—I have to hide somewhere.

Him too... I know he's hiding somewhere, too. I have to find him—

Panicked by the abrupt crisis in the dead of night, she simply fled from the noise without any sort of plan. She'd meant to go down into the ship's hold and hide until the situation had resolved itself, but—

The instant she reached the bottom of the stairs into the depths of the hull, a wrinkled hand covered her head.

Her eyes went wide with terror. Reflected in them was the grim smile of the old man who was the cause of the uproar.

"To think I'd get to eat a young woman in a place like this. My carnal impulses died long ago, but despite my years, I'm excited."

Then the right hand he'd set on her head tensed.

...But nothing happened.

The eyes of the old man—Szilard Quates—widened slightly. His expression suggested he couldn't understand the situation, but after a moment, realization dawned.

"Sylvie, you witch... *You didn't drink it, did you?*"

".....Ah..... Aaaah..."

Pinned by Szilard's coldly gleaming eyes, the girl he'd called Sylvie was petrified, unable to answer.

He'll kill me.

In the instant that certainty hit her, Szilard's right arm abruptly left her head—and fell to the floor with a thump. The old man's arm had been severed partway down, and blood pulsed vigorously from the cut surface.

The blood splattered on Sylvie as well, but each drop immediately began trembling, then gathering like a swarm of small insects, and then each was drawn back into Szilard's arm of its own accord. The severed surfaces were joined together. As if the blood between them had been changed into rubber, they writhed toward one another, attempting to regenerate.

"Gkh... UoooOooogh!"

"Apparently we feel pain, even if we are immortal. I am pleased I

was able to experiment on you.”

The two heard an arrogant voice from beside Szilard as he desperately bore the agony.

When Sylvie searched for the source, she found a brown-skinned young man. His right hand held a blade that looked like a Chinese cleaver, and his face was suffused with a quiet rage.

“Nile... You cur!”

“I am incredibly angry at the moment, but allow me to express this thought: I will kill you.”

Szilard’s arm had completely regenerated, and the man called Nile raised his knife.

“While there is absolutely no need to say it, let me inform you: Die.”

The thick blade bore down on him with enough force to cleave his skull. Evading it by a hair, Szilard slipped past Nile and dashed toward the stairs leading upward on the opposite side.



Nile didn't try to go after him. Instead, he spoke to the girl, who'd fallen to her knees and was trembling like a leaf.

"Hmm. Are you all right?"

Just as Sylvie got to her feet and was about to say something...

"Hi there, you two. You okay?"

As Nile offered his haughty consideration, from above his head they heard a voice that was completely wrong for the situation.

"Guess I didn't even need to check; you look fine. That's great, that's really fantastic. Sylvie and Nile... That's wonderful. All right, I know this is abrupt, but *c'mon and smile*. Show me your teeth; give me a big ol' grin."

When the pair looked up, they saw a man whose beaming face didn't betray the slightest sense of danger.

The guy, who'd poked his head in from the top of the stairs, had hooked his fingers into the corners of his mouth and pulled, forming a big grin.

"Goan, aiuhl, aiuhl. (Go on, smile, smile.)"

"Elmer. Does this look like an appropriate time for jokes?"

When Nile reproached him, the man he'd called Elmer responded by shrugging. The smile on his face showed no sign of fading. However, strangely, the expression didn't strike him as sarcastic, so Nile made no attempt to force him to stop.

"I'm not joking. When you're panicking, for starters, it's better to smile. Smiling will cool your head."

"You are the only one foolish enough to smile in this situation," Nile replied. "If you can hide, you should do so immediately."

At that, Elmer quietly shook his head. "No, I'm going to try to talk old Szilard down, so you two wait here."

He had said the words pragmatically. However, Sylvie and Nile objected, eyes wide, as if they couldn't believe their ears.

"Let me just say this: It's useless. Even supposing you did manage to talk him down, Maiza would never be satisfied with that," Nile insisted. "If he's going to die anyway, the rest of us will take less damage if we kill him immediately."

Elmer shrugged. "If that happens, I'll try to talk Maiza down, too."

"How naïve can you possibly..."

"Yeah, I agree that it's naïve. That's why I'm gonna talk him down first. If I fail and get eaten, then the rest of you can do whatever you want."

Elmer spoke as if he were merely going out for lunch, and in spite of herself, Sylvie cried out:

“You can’t! You’ll never stop him! He—when he tried to eat me, he *smiled*! As if he was really enjoying himself—! There’s no way you’ll get through to a man like that!”

However, when Elmer heard that, his answer was even stranger:

“So old Szilard was smiling? I see... In that case, it’ll work out somehow.”

“What...?”

Ignoring the young woman’s mystified expression, Elmer grinned. “C’mon, Sylvie, smile! You have to smile!” he called down enthusiastically from the top of the stairs, only to laugh as he withdrew his head from view.

Sylvie and Nile were left behind, and before long, the young woman fearfully asked a question.

It wasn’t about Elmer’s abnormal personality. It was about something Nile had said in their conversation, something she hadn’t been able to understand.

“Listen...Nile? You said Maiza wouldn’t be satisfied... What did you mean by that?”

“Hmm...”

Nile’s face clouded.

“It... It can’t be... Can it? No, it couldn’t possibly...”

As if trying to confirm something, Sylvie shook Nile’s brown arm fiercely.

“Tell me it isn’t; say it isn’t that! Nile, *please*!”

Before the tearful Sylvie, Nile only kept his silence.

“Dammit, where did the old man go?!”

“Found him! He’s up on deck!”

“Heeey, Old Man Szilard! Over here, look at me, listen to me!”

“What’s that? Is that Elmer?”

“Wh-what...is...he...do...ing? Why...is...he...up...there...?”

“Aaah, look out—!”

“Elmer!”

A splash. Then silence.

Elmer’s mind was enveloped in infinite darkness.

And then...he heard a voice.

<Are you all right? >

At the sound, Elmer’s consciousness began to return, dimly.

He felt a strange sensation, as if he’d lain down in midair. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw a man’s vaguely familiar face. Aside

from that, there was nothing except endless blackness.

<You're a foolish fellow. Doing a flip on the prow of the ship to get that old man's attention... Well, never mind. After all, because you fell into the ocean, you escaped being eaten.>

That "Well, never mind"... Of course. I remember. This guy's the demon.

The demon who'd given them immortality. Elmer had just assumed he'd gone away. What was he doing down here? Even as Elmer fuzzily pondered, the demon indifferently continued.

<I'd intended to leave, but I saw something interesting on my way out... Well, never mind. More importantly, I hear you meant to talk that old man down. Did you think that would be possible?>

The demon asked his question quietly, looking at Elmer as if he were some sort of strange life form. After giving it a little thought, Elmer spoke with a smile that didn't go past his lips.

"I thought it might be. After all, Sylvie said Szilard smiled."

<He smiled?>

"...If you can smile, that means you're still at least a little human. Even if the smile belongs to a murderer right after he's gratified his desires, I'll never say it doesn't count. No matter what shape it takes, as long as someone's able to smile, there's still a chance that you can resolve the situation by talking it out. Maybe wars are different, but this case is still about the feelings and wants of individuals. No matter how small the possibility is, I want to try."

<Oho. From the way things looked, though, I'd say what you were attempting was very close to impossible.>

"Even so. It felt like eating Szilard immediately wasn't the happiest ending for that situation. Letting him get away would have been worse. Talk the old guy down, have him give a genuine apology, then make him atone for his sins through eternity until, someday, everybody else forgives him."

<You'd ignore the people he already ate?>

"The dead don't smile anymore. They don't feel joy or anger either. That's what dying means. If there are ghosts in this world... well, you can't say they're really dead, as far as I'm concerned. Anyway, I think it's important to respect the dead—but they don't really interest me."

After a brief silence, the demon's voice echoed directly into his brain.

<Hmm. I thought you were just softhearted, but there are surprisingly strong elements of villainy in you. Well, never mind... You're an interesting man. All right; there must be some sort of fate at work here.>

At that, the demon made him an unbelievably tempting offer.

<Let me grant you some sort of power. Tell me what you'd like. Do you want me to take from you the ability to devour and be devoured, giving you perfect immortality? Would you prefer the power to see over vast distances? I could give you the art of stopping time, or the power to bend humans to your will. Anything. >

"You're like an Arabian djinni."

<That's not far off. Although I'm only offering one wish, not three. >

With an ironic expression, the demon shook his head slightly.

After thinking for a little while, Elmer smiled and spoke:

"I've made up my mind, demon."

<That was fast. >

The voice in his mind sounded surprised.

Then, with no hesitation, Elmer named the power he wanted.

"Listen, demon, I—"



"Hey, Elmer! Are you all right?!"

"Oh, he's awake!"

"Good, that's great."

At the sound of someone smacking his cheeks, Elmer realized his view was flooded with light.

When he looked around, he saw that he was on the deck and that the rising sun was warmly shining down on him. Putting the facts in order, he pieced together that after he'd fallen into the sea, someone had pulled him back out.

"...What happened to old Szilard?"

"Huey and Denkurou cornered him, but he threw himself into the ocean and got away."

"I see..."

Hearing the outcome from his companion's lips, Elmer responded with a brief murmur.

Complicated thoughts filled him, and although he'd begun to sit up, he lowered himself to the deck again and gazed at the sky. The morning sun shone into his eyes, but stars still gleamed in the highest part of the heavens.

When he happened to glance up, the companions around him were watching him, sighing with relief.

As he watched their smiles, Elmer fell back into sleep again.

However...just before his mind shut down, his ears caught sobs coming from somewhere on the ship. When he heard them, Elmer

gave a truly sad smile.

“You mustn’t do that, Sylvie. Smile, you’ve got to smile...”

He murmured as if in a delirium, and this time his mind did plunge into the depths of the darkness.

And—time passed.

1998
December
A certain village in Northern Europe

Northern Europe
The forest

Bold and stubborn, the deep, snow-covered woods kept the village hidden.

In this forest, the conifers grew more thickly than they should. The trees crowded against each other, as if defying the laws of nature.

A lone shadow crawled along, weaving its way through the gaps in the trees.

The shadow wore heavy winter gear, forming a puffy silhouette as it wandered aimlessly through the snowy forest.

“Not good.”

Stopping in front of an enormous tree, the figure spoke, sounding just a little troubled. The breath streaming from his mouth turned white immediately, fogging his vision slightly.

As the frosty burst cleared, the man glanced up at the sky.

The blue that showed through the gaps in the evergreens had acquired a faintly darker hue, hinting that it wouldn't be long until sunset.

“Maybe it was bum information. Come to think of it, there's no way anyone would build a castle out here in the back of beyond.”

As the man spoke, he lowered his gaze again and sized up his surroundings.

The evergreens were abnormally dense, and snow peeked out from the spaces between them in a pattern of pure white stripes.

“Well now, what to do... Should I turn back, or—?”

Murmuring to himself, he turned, looking around at the forest. Compared to the direction he'd just come from, there seemed to be less snow up ahead. The atmosphere that hung about this forest was odd to begin with, and the thick trees blocked out the sunlight, as if night was waiting beyond them.

After giving it a little thought, the man set off again, heading deeper into the forest.

Almost as if he was being drawn by something...



A person has come to the village.

It's a man.

He's wearing thick clothes, and the only part of him exposed to the air is a bit of his face.

I'm standing at the entrance to the village when he walks up to me and says just one word:

"Hello."

He's making a strange face. Both corners of his mouth are raised, and his eyes are half-shut.

It isn't an expression I often see from the villagers.

It's the sort of expression "people from outside" sometimes wear.

I still don't really understand what it means.

Correction: I must have known once. I've only forgotten. After all, I haven't been able to observe one for a very long time.

"I tell you what—it's nippy here, isn't it! Really and truly frigid! I'd better be grateful for this wonderful cold! If it hadn't been so cold, this cold-weather gear would have been completely useless!"

It's a loud voice. A clear voice.

"By the way, does this village have an inn or something? If it does, could you tell me where to find it? I camped in the forest yesterday, see, and then I walked all night, so I'd like to rest somewhere."

Inn. A facility to accommodate people from outside.

The village doesn't have one, so I shake my head.

"You're kidding! There isn't one? That's a problem. Is there someplace I could rest? As long as it'll keep the wind and the rain off, anywhere's fine. Like, say, a waterwheel shed. By the way, what's the name of this place? I really didn't think anyone would be living this deep in the woods. Or is there a road that leads to town on the other side of the village? Still, on the map, it looked as though this whole area was forest for several dozen miles... Talk about unreliable. I guess you really can't trust anything you haven't seen or heard yourself! Don't you think so? Oh, that's right: My name is Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. 'El' for short. It's great to meet you!"

Words. A vast quantity of words flows into me. There are so many of them that they overwhelm my capacity for them, and I'm unable to respond well. In the space of a breath, this person has rattled off more sentences than the villagers speak in an entire day.

Elmer.

Of the deluge of words breaking over me, that name is the only one I manage to remember.

“Oh, sorry, sorry! The thing is, it’s been a long time since I saw anyone else, and—I’m such a dolt—even though I was talking to a cute little kid like you, all I did was go on and on about myself! Hold on, you do understand me, right? I am using this country’s official language, technically speaking. But wait, am I wrong? Um, let’s see, getting back to the original topic, is there anywhere I can rest?”

I do understand him. It’s just that my abilities can’t keep up.

“I shall...take you there. Master...Elmer.”

I respond as usual. It’s no different from the way I always act with the villagers.

However, when I speak, Master Elmer cocks his head to one side.

“Ah? Why are you being so formal? Oh, wait—do you waitress at a dining hall or something? Is that it?”

Again, without waiting for my answer, Master Elmer keeps talking a blue streak.

“I tell you what, though, the people in this village are funny. The minute I got here, everybody ran into their houses and shut the windows! Does this village not like strangers or something? Or are they getting ready for Christmas, maybe?”

Christmas. Another unfamiliar term.

I don’t know how to respond, so I only gaze quietly at Master Elmer’s face.

“...What’s this, what’s this, what—what? What? Did I say something weird? If I did, I’m sorry, but...”

“What is...Christmas?”

I voice my question.

That is my duty, after all.

“.....What? Don’t you know? Christmas. I see... It’s even taken root in the Far East lately, so I just assumed it would be common knowledge in these parts. Is your religion different, maybe? I guess I’ll look into that later.”

He murmurs the last part as if to himself, then glances at my face and bursts out laughing.

“I see, all right. Well, here’s what we’ll do, then! If the religion around here doesn’t forbid it, I’ll teach you about Christmas! Oh, Christmas is... Well, frankly, it’s a festival, a party! Everyone gets crazy and noisy together, and they eat turkey and pie and give each other presents!”

Master Elmer’s face distorts even further.

His voice is loud. Then he puts his hands out toward me.

His hands touch my cheeks.

“That’s right, we smile. When there’s a festival, everybody smiles. Smile, that’s right, smile! You know, it’s a bit strange to say this out of the blue, but kids like you are cutest when you smile, see? Well, erm, I

guess it's kind of cliché to say, but as your Christmas present, I'll help you smile! I bet it'll be cute, it'll be real cute, incredibly cute! You'll be popular with all the boys your age!"

As he says this, Master Elmer pinches my cheeks lightly.

I don't put up any real resistance, and I remember something.

The expression he is wearing is called a "smile."

It's the face people make when they think something is fun.

"Look forward to it: We'll be having a party the day after tomorrow! Generally, at this point, you'd already be smiling, you know?"

Little by little, I remember. What it feels like to have fun, and the memories I have in connection with it.

I want to remember more. More, more.

It feels as though if I talk with this person, I'll be able to remember lots of things. I might learn things I don't know yet. Two days from now, during this "Christmas" festival—More, more.

I remember one more thing.

Is this the feeling called "anticipation"? Or should I call it "hope"—?

That was two days ago.

A stone-floor room.

Sounds echoing in it.

Splorch, blutch, skash.

Sounds like those, over and over.

Right now, the thing that used to be Master Elmer is lying in front of me.

Just a thing. A clothed, human-shaped lump of meat, leaking red liquid.

The villagers are standing around it.

They have wooden clubs and stones in their hands, and they're bringing them down on Master Elmer's body by turns.

Splorch, splat, splish.

The dull sounds continue around us. Master Elmer doesn't move.

Someone is standing in front of me.

A middle-aged man. Whiskered face. Boss. The village's. The village headman.

“Dammit, dragging us out here where the monster might appear... You’re evil to the core, you good-for-nothing.”

I can see Master Dez’s foot. Under his thick boot, there’s a pretty ornament made out of paper. An ornament that used to be pretty.

Pretty. The natural way the descriptor surfaced strikes me as odd.

When did I remember the word *pretty*?

As my head fills with questions, the club comes down on it again

Red, red, redredredredredredredredredredredred





CHAPTER 1
JOY ANGER SORROW FUN

Maiza Avaro

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JOY ANGER SORROW FUN

Maiza Avaro

2001

December

In a certain forest, in a certain country in Northern Europe

“Listen, are you sure this is the right road?”

A car with four-wheel drive was traveling through the woods. The speaker was a small boy riding in the front passenger seat.

There was no pavement. The car was running at full speed down a rough, narrow lane covered in gravel, sending up gouts of the snow that had accumulated on the road’s surface.

But it wasn’t snowing at the moment, and beyond the car windows, sunlight filtered down through the evergreens. However, as the car advanced, the amount of light was steadily decreasing, and as it did so...

“It looks like we’re just heading deeper and deeper into the woods, not toward any village! And besides...there are barely any signs that other cars have ever gone this way before.”

“We should be headed in the right direction... That said, it does look as though the road may disappear on us soon.”

From the driver’s seat, a bespectacled man responded to the boy’s uneasy question.

The man, whose glasses had clunky black frames, was gripping the steering wheel and smiling mildly.

“...Well, if you say so, Maiza. It’s probably all right, but...I’ve got a really bad feeling about this forest, although I can’t put it into words.”

“Ha-ha. You always were a worrywart, Czes.”

“That’s not true. You’re just too easygoing.”

The boy—Czeslaw Meyer—spoke sharply, sulking pointedly in the direction of the driver, one Maiza Avaro.

Glancing at Czes out of the corner of his eye, Maiza kept right on smiling cheerfully.

“When you’ve lived a long time, it makes you patient.”

Though Maiza didn't even look thirty, the boy spoke, undaunted:
"I'll be *three hundred* soon, too. There's not much difference between us in age or experience anymore."

Put briefly, the two were what one would call *immortals*.

They weren't vampires or a type of evil spirit; they had completely undying bodies, and aside from attacks from their own kind, they had no weaknesses whatsoever.

This was a blessing for them, now that they had reached this state, but at the same time, it was a curse. There was one way these immortals could die: by devouring one another. All they had to do to ingest another was to set their right hand upon the head of the target and clearly think:

I will absorb all this person has.

Simply by willing it, they could take everything about the other person and make it their own: memories, knowledge, even their ingrained experiences.

The alchemists had killed one another as if it were a game, as if they were being made to dance on the palm of the demon who'd given them immortality. That said, most of the violence had been committed by one old man.

Two centuries and several decades later, the group of more than thirty alchemists had been reduced to a number that could be counted on one's fingers. However, with the death of Szilard Quates—the man who had originally begun the slaughter and had been at the heart of the disaster—the terror had gradually faded away.

Maiza and Czes had been journeying around the world to meet with the companions who didn't yet know about Szilard's death. In order to escape Szilard's clutches, the immortals had hidden themselves thoroughly.

Now that they had learned the whereabouts of one companion, Elmer C. Albatross, they were traveling through the woods of a distant country...

In the midst of the vibrations from the rough road, their conversation died away.

Silence filled the car for a short while, until a woman's voice broke it from the backseat.

"So what sort of place is this village we're going to? Do you think they'll at least have showers?"

It was a pure, transparent voice.

On the right side of the rear seat, a woman stretched, lacing her fingers together.

The wrists that peeked from the sleeves of her coat formed slim,

smooth contours that hinted at her beauty. Soft, silken bangs swayed gently over a symmetrical face reminiscent of pumas or leopards. Her short silver hair wasn't evenly trimmed, but this only accentuated her features.

By general standards, she fit into the "beautiful" category quite easily. However, her loveliness wasn't the natural sort used to depict goddesses in pictures. It brimmed over with a succubine allure that seemed to have been specifically tailored to human desires.

"Nn..."

The woman—Sylvie Lumiere—stretched her upper body as far as she could, then sighed. She still looked rather sleepy. Anyone would have found the gesture seductive, regardless of gender, but possibly because Maiza was used to her, his expression hardly changed when he glanced at her in the rearview mirror.

"Well, we won't know about that until we get there," he said.

"Hmm... Still, do you think he's really there? Elmer, I mean."

"He should be. My local information broker doesn't spread disinformation."

He sounded convinced, and Sylvie didn't press the issue. However, as if to call attention to his unease, Czes added, "But, Maiza, it's getting darker and darker out here—and it's not even noon yet."

Czes was looking downward, as if worried about what lay ahead. From behind his seat, Sylvie wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Aww, Czes. You're as cute as ever."

"Agh! Sylvie, don't! I'm not a kid anymore!"

"It's fine, it's fine! You *look* like a kid, and if you're cute, you're cute!"

Sylvie leaned farther forward, putting her face up close to Czes's head. Flustered, Czes blushed furiously and turned to Maiza, ignoring Sylvie.

"I mean it, though. These woods really are creepy... With this atmosphere, you'd think there were monsters here."

On hearing that, Sylvie giggled and began to pet Czes's head.

"What are you talking about? Monsters...? Now *that* sounds like a little kid, if you ask me."

Shaking off the smooth-skinned arms that clung to him, Czes murmured darkly, "You've never seen a monster, Sylvie. That's why you can say that."

What's that supposed to mean?

But before she could ask, Maiza spoke quietly, his lips drawn into a line. "It really is a bit odd, isn't it?"

"What's the matter?" Sylvie asked.

"The woods around us. They're just... For a coniferous forest, it's too dense. It's as though the trees are being forced to grow, even in

places that clearly don't get much sunlight."

As Maiza said this, Sylvie returned to the rear seat and looked around. The trees were so dense, they seemed to be leaning into each other. It almost felt as if they were blocking the gaps in the forest to keep people from entering.

"...True, it is a little eerie. I wonder why it's like that."

"That's a good question... If we keep going, we may learn something."

"Well, I guess it might be the perfect place for Elmer." All Sylvie could do was trust the driver's suggestion, and she slumped back in her seat as she spoke. "If the worst villain of the alchemists on that ship was Szilard, Huey was the scariest. The weirdest one, though... That was Elmer, hands down. He startled me all over the place back then... Although he was the most fun, too."

"Was Huey that scary?" Maiza asked lightly. "Granted, it was hard to tell what he was thinking, but..."

"Yes, terrifying. I think Elmer was about the only one who was really close to him."

"Well, Elmer did have a fearless side... He said all sorts of dubious things, such as how he'd successfully swindled Louis the Fourteenth, or how he wore a cursed diamond without losing his luck, but he was the type of fellow who might actually have done them."

As he spoke, Maiza stopped the car and looked ahead.

It was something rather too perilous to be called a "small hill."

The slope itself was gentle, but it was a rough pile of stones, dirt, and sand. The idea of traversing it on foot was daunting enough, never mind driving over it in an ordinary car. And even if they tried to detour around it, the abnormally dense forest around them continued up the hill on both sides with the gravel road in between.

"From what I hear, a tunnel went through the hill at this point, long ago, but... It appears there was a landslide, doesn't it?" Maiza said. "It must have collapsed quite some time ago, but no trees have taken root in the space. That's a great help."

"What do you mean, 'a great help'? We can't get through if it's like this. I wonder why they don't repair the tunnel."

In answer to Sylvie's question, Maiza shrugged. "They say no one used it to begin with, since this was simply the entrance to private property up ahead. The person who owned the land may have decided not to use the tunnel at all."

"Hmm... Wha—? Maiza, wait just a minute!" Czes, who'd been on the verge of agreeing, spoke in mild panic from the passenger seat. "What do you mean, 'private land'? You said Elmer was in a small village..."

“That’s right. Apparently the village is up ahead, *on that private land.*” Maiza was indifferent, but Czes and Sylvie exchanged looks in the rearview mirror.

“Ha-ha-ha. You know,” the man continued good-naturedly, “I tried to get in touch with the owner using various excuses—vegetation surveys and the like—but nothing worked. From what I hear, he’s a wealthy individual, but I have absolutely no connections in this country, so...”

Maiza was an executive in a certain illegal organization in America, but in areas where he had no personal connections, things didn’t go as smoothly as they did at home. At that point, for the first time, Sylvie frowned, murmuring:

“A village...on private land?”

“That’s right.”

“Are you sure you can trust this information broker of yours?”

“Of course.”

Maiza spoke with great confidence, and Sylvie looked at him, seeming rather appalled.

“All right, here we go. Hold on tight.”

Before Czes and Sylvie could ask, *Go where?* Maiza abruptly revved the engine.

“Wait— Mai—”

Czes’s yell was drowned out as the whole car shook violently.

*Grunch-grunch-grunch-grunch! Grunch-grunch-grunch! Grunch!
Grunch! Grunch-grunch-grunch-grunch! Grunch-grunch! Grunch-grunch-
grunch-grunch-grunch-grunch.*

The impacts formed a chain.

Czes’s light body was jostled up, down, and side to side in the cramped car, the vibrations traveling through his hips and back until he could feel them in his stomach and lungs.

“Waaaaaaah!”

“Ooh

tops of their skulls.

<Gwaugh!>

In that instant, from behind the rear seat—a space between the backrest and the rear panel—they heard a man scream, but the three were catching their breath and paid it no particular attention.

“...Sometimes you get insanely reckless, Maiza,” Czes commented.

“Well, in my line of work...”

“Every so often, I really resent the way you do things at your own speed,” Sylvie followed.

“No, no, I’m terribly sorry about that.”

The pair turned aggrieved eyes on Maiza, who was nowhere near breaking out in a cold sweat.

Deflecting their ire with a smile, Maiza turned his attention to the car’s surroundings.

The trees were as dense as ever, and the snow covering the ground seemed significantly thinner than it had been in the open fields.

“All right, if we go on this way, we should reach it in about three miles.”

<Maiza, you reprobate! Do you intend to kill me?!>

Suddenly, an angry bellow echoed from the trunk space behind the rear seat, a place intended for luggage. However, Maiza stepped on the gas as though nothing had happened. Once he was sure there was nothing wrong with the engine, he threw in the clutch and shifted into low gear.

<Are you listening to me, you scoundrel?!>

“Yes, Nile, I’m listening.”

Answering calmly, Maiza floored the accelerator.

“The road’s going to stay rough for a while, so be careful not to bite your tongue.”

Even as he spoke, the spinning tires were sending plumes of snow high into the air.

<Don’t brush me off. Let me say this: That propensity of yours is the reason your lover ran out on— *Blugh!*>

Some sort of dull sound came from the direction of the trunk. For just a moment, Maiza turned around with concern, but he faced forward again almost immediately and concentrated on driving.

The man’s voice had fallen silent.

Seen from the sidelines, the situation was far from normal, but none of the car’s passengers seemed the least bit worried. They simply pressed on through the shadows of the forest.

Toward a village that would never appear on any map, in search of their old friend...



People have come to the village.

They're riding in something strange.

A huge metal box. It looks like a carriage, but it isn't quite that tall.

It actually looks like the big cart that the traders sometimes arrive in.

The way it runs all by itself, without using horses, is like the traders, too.

They don't seem to be traders, though. It really doesn't look as if they've brought any goods.

The metal box stops at the entrance to the village. I am the first to notice it.

However, the first to approach are the villagers.

They all have weapons in hand. One by one, they surround the cart.

Someone is going to be hurt again.

Someone is going to be hurt, *again*.

I'm sure of it. This is just like before.

Just like five years ago, the first time Master Elmer was killed.

I only watch. Now, as before, I do nothing but observe the villagers filled with unease and hostility.

Afterward, I will only send word about it.

Because that is my duty now.



"There it is."

Finally leaving the forest, the car carrying Maiza and the others advanced down a road that was a little clearer.

Abruptly, the view opened up, and a blanket of snow spread all around them. At first they thought it was just a plain, but the road seemed to have been built deliberately straight, so they decided that it was probably fields or some sort of farmland.

"Wheat fields, perhaps?" Maiza wondered.

At this, Czes and Sylvie looked around. The farmland was surrounded by the forest, and it seemed to cover quite a lot of area. The snow wasn't very deep, and the ground showed through in places.

And, at the end of the road, in the direction the car was traveling, they could see several buildings.

"There actually...is a village," Czes stated.

"Is this really private land?" Sylvie wondered.

With their dumbfounded voices in his ears, Maiza stopped the car near what seemed to be the entrance to the settlement.

The buildings were made of stone. From a distance, he'd thought they were farm sheds, but apparently they functioned as proper houses. He'd made the mistake because they seemed disparate from the townscapes of the rest of the country.

Not only were the buildings themselves old, but the atmosphere of the entire village—what he could see of it—seemed somehow old-fashioned. It made him feel as if he'd wandered onto some sort of film set. He looked around, but he saw nothing more modern, and it really did seem as if he'd found his way into a movie.

The only reason he didn't mistake the situation for a slip through time was that...the village didn't look like the past he and the others actually knew. There was something odd about it; it was as if, instead of occurring naturally, it had been built according to someone's calculations...

"It's a larger settlement than I expected."

The road continued into the village, and several houses stood alongside it—apparently, it was the main street. In addition to the stone homes, wooden buildings and structures that resembled log cabins gave the street a rather patchwork atmosphere.

"It looks like they threw this place together in a hurry. Although, it seems too outdated for that..."

"I think it's splendid. What a primitive atmosphere."

Behind Czes and Maiza, who were exchanging brief opinions, Sylvie gloomily muttered to herself:

"That's a pity. It doesn't look as if they'll have showers... I doubt they even have running water."

Shoulders slumping, eyes downcast, she gave a gratuitously sensual sigh.

When Maiza replied, his tone had changed very slightly. "Sylvie, I'm afraid that may be the least of our worries."

"What's the matter?"

At his words, Sylvie looked out the window again. It was then that she noticed it: In the center of the road stood a girl in shabby clothes. She seemed nervous for some reason, and she was staring at them fixedly.

"That girl? What about her?"

"Around her."

This time Czes had spoken, but his voice held a trace of tension as well.

Sensing something unusual in his expression, Sylvie held her

breath and strained her eyes. Then she realized that although she'd assumed the girl was alone on the road, many other eyes shone there.

As if they'd materialized from the shadows of buildings and the edges of window frames, a host of human figures were glaring at Maiza's car from all sorts of places.

"Hmm. I suspected that might be the case."

"What?"

In response to Czes's nervous question, Maiza adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. He seemed troubled.

"The thing is, there are other examples of villages on private land. They often appear in connection with certain religions or illegal organizations, for example."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning there's no telling what they'll do to outsiders. It's possible that they'll simply turn us over to the police for trespassing, but if we're unlucky—"

Narrowing his already threadlike eyes, Maiza bluntly delivered the bottom line.

"We'll get an ending I'd rather not think about."

"Let's run. I don't want trouble."

"Wait, Czes. If Elmer is here, we'll need to ask those people about it either way. If he's become a member of this village and we explain the situation to them, they'll give us a warm welcome, too."

Czes's response to Maiza's wishful thinking was stubbornly pessimistic. "And if they didn't accept him? Or if he was never here in the first place?"

"Someone's coming over here."

"Maiza? Hey, answer my question. Look at me! Maiza!"

Ignoring the fact that Czes was shaking him violently, their driver got out of the car alone.

"Well, if that happens, we'll deal with it then. We'll run away at top speed."

A man was walking toward them from farther down the road, followed by several young villagers.

He was middle-aged, with a mustache and a sharp gleam in his eyes, and he seemed rather nasty. His lean body was wrapped in thick winter gear, but the garments seemed to be composed mostly of furs with no man-made fibers in them. The young people behind him were dressed in a similar fashion, and they carried hunting rifles and metal clubs.

The rifles were very old models. Working from his memories, Maiza determined that they were from about a century ago.

The girl standing in the road was in their way, and the village men roughly pushed her aside as they made straight for Maiza's car.

They strode across flagstones where the snow had melted, their eyes sharp with anxiety.

With each building the group of men passed, the owners of the eyes watching from inside emerged, and little by little the crowd approaching Maiza and the others grew.

Some of the new figures were women, and for some reason, many held farming hoes or kitchen knives. Even at a glance, it was obvious that the group was brimming over with hostility.

In response, without any particular sign of fear, Maiza shut the car door. He stretched, but he kept one hand behind his back, curled around the handle, so that if it came down to it, he could jump into the car at any time.

First things first: I hope we can find a language we both speak...

"...Who are you? You're not a trader. How did you get here?"

Ignoring Maiza's worry, the whiskered man spoke. Maiza had meant to speak to him first, but the man had stopped farther away than expected.

For the moment, Maiza was relieved that the other man was using a language he himself knew—the official language of the country—and his expression softened slightly.

"My apologies. We're travelers, you see."

If he named the person they were looking for right away, he might only make them warier. For now, Maiza decided to say they were traveling and watch how the group reacted.

"...Travelers?"

The mustachioed man regarded him with distrust. He glanced to the car, glaring at Maiza. His eyes held a dark light, and Maiza detected an emotion that was closer to loathing than anger.

After giving Maiza a once-over and taking in the car behind him, the man spoke, his expression still hard.

"Get all the passengers out here."

"Why?"

"Confirmation. We're making sure you don't have anyone suspicious in there."

What standard were they planning to base their investigation on? He was concerned, but it wouldn't be wise to argue needlessly. With that thought, Maiza gave a small sigh and signaled to Czes and Sylvie in the car.

The moment Czes, who looked like a young boy, got out of the car, the group's hostility eased, just a little.

Then, when Sylvie emerged from the backseat... The eyes of the crowd around them widened slightly.

She stepped out of the car, pulling on her coat as she went, and directed a silent challenge at the people around her. Then, half closing

her androgynous eyes, she leaned against the car door in a gentle motion.

Sylvie's actions softened the group's hostility even further. Several of the men were gazing at her with very different emotions from a moment before.

"...Is that everybody?" Only one, the man with whiskers, maintained unwavering hostility. He shot a stern look at Maiza.

"You're very cautious."

Instead of answering the question, Maiza responded ironically.

Without letting it rile or mollify him, the mustachioed man indifferently replied, "I'm Dez Nibiru, village headman."

"Well, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm—"

Without listening to Maiza's self-introduction, the whiskered man—Dez—looked away and continued, "We aren't interested in outsiders, and you can't stay here. Leave. Now."

"That's rather unfriendly. We won't ask you to put us up for the night. Can't we simply camp somewhere?"

"The village doesn't have the leeway to deal with outsiders right now. We don't want trouble. If you do something uncalled for, that demon will—"

When he'd spoken that far, Dez faltered slightly.

"Demon?"



A face appeared in Maiza's mind. It belonged to the man they'd called "the demon," the one who'd given them immortality—a companion who should have been in distant New York now. However, even as he thought it couldn't possibly be him, he'd asked the village headman just to make sure.

"Nothing. Never mind, just hurry and get out of this village...no, out of this forest."

"What did you mean, 'demon'?"

Clicking his tongue irritably at Maiza's curiosity, the man grudgingly added, "...There's a monster here."

An isolated region in the middle of the forest. A monster that menaced the village.

The occult story—or rather, a sort of folk tale or legend—had come up abruptly. However, Maiza didn't snort at it. Instead, he listened quietly to Dez.

"You could never know how we suffer at his hands. And even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it."

"What kind of monster is it?"

"I've got nothing more to say to you! Get out!" the man named Dez spat with fogged breath. His face was flushed.

After a short silence, Maiza murmured, as if confirming something:

"Elmer...Elmer C. Albatross."

Rustle.

The air writhed.

The moment the name left Maiza's lips, the attitude of the people around him changed dramatically. The hostility, which had nearly faded, rebounded as if by magic. The men bewitched by Sylvie turned back to Maiza so quickly that they might have been spring-loaded dolls.

Even the village head, whose face had rarely even twitched, opened both eyes wide and looked Maiza and the others over again.

"Why, you..."

"We're looking for that man. If he isn't in this village, we'll leave immedia—"

"Get them!"

The headman's roar echoed over the village's main road, cutting Maiza's words short.

The villagers, faces and bodies tense, burst into action. They moved with the force of wild animals mobbing their prey, but it seemed as though there was another emotion mixed with the hostility

in their eyes.

Fear?

Maiza realized the true shape of the feeling that lurked behind their expressions, but the men's arms closed in on him before he had time to confirm it.

However, he was as calm as if he'd expected all this. Repeatedly sidestepping without shifting his gaze, Maiza kept evading the men's arms at the last second.

"Wait, please, we aren't really—"

When he looked at the village headman, the young man beside him was pointing a long gun his way.

"I take it there's no use in arguing?"

A gunshot echoed through the quiet village, and Maiza's body rocked with the impact.

"Maiza!"

In spite of herself, Sylvie screamed at the sight. Unlike Maiza, she didn't seem to really understand what was happening; she had her back to the car and hadn't moved a step. Czes had gotten a handle on the situation a bit more quickly and slipped under the car early on.

The bullet grazed Maiza, gouging his thigh. His thick trousers ripped, and a spray of blood misted the air.

Sensing an opportunity, the villagers surrounded him. Only the village headman was looking at something else: the drops of blood from Maiza's leg.

Dez stared at the red spots that had spread across the stone flags, a fierce uneasiness filling his heart.

His anxiety was right on the mark.

The blood that should have stuck to the pavement suddenly began to slide over the ground.

As if they had a will of their own, the red spots gathered, making for Maiza's feet.

Like dancing shadows, they collided with one another, mingled... and finally climbed up Maiza's leg to disappear through the rip in his trousers, into the wound.

The villagers who'd been attempting to immobilize Maiza registered the abnormal sight while it was happening. First they stopped dead, and then, turning pale, they gradually retreated.

"The same..."

"Demon."

"He's like that guy...!"

"He'll kill us."

"Defile us."

"Don't meet his eyes..."

The villagers muttered in low voices to one another.

“Hmm?”

Seeing this, Maiza felt a slight uncertainty.

He'd regenerated in front of people who didn't know the circumstances before. Quite naturally, those who saw it were terrified, and most of them distanced themselves from him immediately. One of the few exceptions was an individual who ran a small crime syndicate in New York: his one and only boss.

However, the villagers' response had been a little different from what he'd seen before. Ordinarily, when Maiza's body healed, people feared him as something unknowable... But this group seemed to be frightened because they recognized this distressing phenomenon. This wasn't fear of the unknown. They already held a concept of beings that regenerated, and that concept held some sort of terror for them.

I see. For the most part, I understand.

Nodding to himself, Maiza took another look at the situation around him.

When he did, he saw that several of the people who'd distanced themselves from him were edging toward Sylvie. From the way they kept stealing glances at him as they closed in on her, they were probably planning to use her as a hostage.

“Hey, don't you dare!”

With her back against the car door, Sylvie tried to slap away the hand of the first man who reached for her.

However, the villager moved just a little bit faster, and he trapped Sylvie's slim wrist easily.

Maiza turned, preparing to go rescue her, but then he saw something and stopped in his tracks. Behind Sylvie, with the faint hum of a motor, the window in the car's rear door had begun to roll down.

The villager who had hold of Sylvie's arm was desperate to subdue her, and he didn't seem to have noticed.

Through the window, a brown palm reached for him—

Clamp.

The hand at the end of the long arm stretching from the window wrapped around the villager's wrist as he tried to immobilize Sylvie.

“Yeek?!”

The young villager screamed, involuntarily distancing himself from his prey.

As if in response, the arm hanging from the window zipped back into the car.

The villager's trapped wrist was hauled along with it by force.

“Waaaaaaaugh!”

Before he had time to struggle, the villager's arm was halfway into the car, and the motor noise echoed again. Someone inside was shutting the window, with the man's arm in it.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Pressure assailed the young man's arm. It wasn't severed, of course—the glass stopped closing once his arm was firmly pinched—and yet the window didn't open either. It compressed the man's flesh and bone with an unsettling creaking noise.

At this sudden, unfathomable development, the villagers near Sylvie froze. Meanwhile, Sylvie peeked into the car through the window—only to hastily leap away from the door.

Just as Sylvie made it to the front of the vehicle, there was a click. The car's rear door was kicked open, hard—with the poor villager's arm still stuck in the window.

"Waaaugh!"

The force lifted the villager's body into the air and very nearly sent him flying, but his trapped arm wouldn't allow it. Something gave an even bigger creak, but the people nearby weren't able to tell whether the noise had come from the window or the bone.

What emerged from the door, which had been flung open as the man screamed, was...

"A mon...ster?"

Unlike their reaction to Maiza a few moments ago, the villagers' voices held a fear of something they didn't understand. The figure of the man exiting the car was just that peculiar.

He was clothed in white fabric from head to toe, and the sleeves that ended halfway down his arms revealed brown skin. His outfit certainly wasn't lightweight, but considering the surrounding temperature, the lack of cloth was enough to make people feel cold just by looking at it.

If that had been all, it wouldn't have qualified as "peculiar." The problem was what was above his neck.

The first thing to catch the eye was the strange mask fixed to his face. It was the sort worn at festivals in Southeast Asia or Hong Kong, with a complicated shape and a light background decorated with garish primary colors.

In addition, all that was visible under that mask was not skin but the pure white of bandages. In other words, this man had bandaged his head and face, and was wearing a mask on top of that. Through the holes where the mask's eyes should have been, they could see glowering eyes that gleamed sharply.

At the incredibly incongruous appearance of this man, the villagers glanced at one another, and a small murmur rippled through them.

Paying no particular attention to them, the masked man spoke dispassionately, watching Maiza.

“Your driving is too rough. I’ll say it again. In fact, *allow me* to say it one more time: Do you intend to kill me?”

The man’s expression was invisible behind the mask, but from his tone, it was clear that he was considerably annoyed.

“Ordinarily, I would either punch or kick you, but considering the situation, I will overlook it. I venture to overlook it.”

“That’s terribly generous of you, Nile.”

Maiza responded to the grandiose speech with a light shrug. Then he turned and addressed the wide-eyed villagers.

“Ah, this man was less a passenger than he was being transported in the backseat, so I didn’t make him get out earlier... In any case, we had no intention of hiding him, so please don’t get the wrong idea.”

However, the village headman and the others weren’t listening. They were looking at the man who’d appeared before them with the expression of a person trapped in a nightmare.

Possibly because he’d noticed the gazes, Nile, the masked man, folded his arms and said to Maiza, “I do not fully understand the situation, but for the moment, things seem to have calmed down. However, permit me to ask: What should I do, Maiza?”

“Erm, I’d like to settle this as peaceably as possible, so no violence, please.”

When Maiza told him this, surveying the villagers as if he was concerned for their safety, Nile nodded with a grunt, then circled around behind the car.

Setting a foot on the spare tire fixed to the back of the car, the masked man began climbing up to the roof with admirable agility. When he’d reached his destination, he folded his arms and looked down on the villagers imposingly.

As the locals stared at him, wondering what on earth was about to happen, Nile slowly opened his mouth:

“Very well. First, you kneel. Then we talk.”



His voice was quiet, but it carried well. What he was saying was absurd, but perhaps Maiza and Sylvie were used to him, because neither of them called him on it. However...

"Nile. These people don't speak English."

...It was probably fortunate that they hadn't understood.

When Maiza mentioned this, silence ran through the area for a moment, and then—

"What?!"

A slightly flustered voice issued from beneath the mask.

"You tricked me, you scoundrel!"

"Nobody's tricked you. Neither I nor these people have used English this entire time. Weren't you listening?"

"...Rrgh. Then it was my mistake, hmm? Yes, I will acknowledge that. I acknowledge it without covering my own embarrassment! However, in addition to Berber, I speak only English, Chinese, and Indonesian. What would you have me do?"

"Please don't do anything. Or, actually, you'll scratch up the roof of the car, so I'd rather you got down at once," Maiza said tiredly, and Sylvie finally opened her mouth.

"The villagers are terribly frightened. You've been screaming words they don't understand at them."

"Oho."

Without diminishing his arrogant attitude, Nile examined the villagers again through his mask. Every villager had widened the ring that encircled them, deliberately trying to put some distance between themselves and the newcomers. The guy whose arm had been trapped in the window seemed to have managed to wrench it out on his own and, slightly teary-eyed, retreated to the very back of the group.

If they'd understood the conversation, its sheer ridiculousness might have lessened their hostility, but apparently Nile's words reached them only as incomprehensible alien sounds.

"I see... Maiza. Let me just say this."

"What is it?"

"It will not be possible to settle this peacefully."

"So it would seem."

Maiza looked around, too, and replied to Nile immediately.

In the midst of the frightened villagers, the only calm ones were the young people standing around the headman. At some point, the number of individuals with rifles at the ready had grown, and all the barrels were pointed at Maiza, Sylvie, and Nile.

"Aim for their heads."

Following the chief's instructions, the men, who seemed as if they might be hunters, took aim with no hesitation.

“If they’re like *him*, they should stop moving for a while when their heads are blown off. If we manage to catch even one of them, we can use them to bargain with him.”

By normal logic, the villagers had the advantage in this situation, but not a single person in the group thought their victory was assured. Even the ones calmly leveling their guns had palms damp with sweat.

As if sneering at the tension, the man on top of the car snorted.

“Go ahead and shoot. The instant you pull the trigger, I will consider you my enemies. Let me just say this: There will be a massacre!”

“Look, I told you, they don’t understand English.”

Even as he sighed, Maiza never let his attention stray from the weapons.

All right: What should we do? We could technically let ourselves be caught on purpose, but...

As he considered, hostility was beginning to build among his adversaries again.

A sky so blue it seemed to mock them spread over their heads, and, as he quietly looked up at it, Maiza made a resolution.

A plan had occurred to him: For now, he would go with the villagers on his own and have the other three run, at least temporarily. They could all run away in the end, but before that, no matter what, he wanted to find some sort of clue regarding Elmer.

The Martillo Family was a New York crime group that was affiliated with the Camorra, an underworld organization. Maiza, who had spent his days as an executive of that group, had left it temporarily to travel around the world.

He wasn’t doing it simply to have fun playing tourist. He was searching for the immortals scattered across the globe.

Together, he and Czes had spent thirty years searching for these alchemists, their old companions. It had taken considerable time and effort just to find Sylvie and Nile, but they had all of eternity, and it hadn’t seemed very long to them. But even so, just when they’d thought they’d never find the remaining two and nearly given up... Maiza had received information on one of them: Elmer C. Albatross.

The news about his companion had come from an information broker he frequented. The perfectly unambiguous report clearly indicated this village as the place. However, aside from its existence and location, there had been nothing specific about the village, and the source of the information had disappeared behind the phrase *company secret*. Still, Maiza had been grasping at straws, and to him, it had seemed like more than enough.

He couldn't let this chance escape him. He had eight months until he had to return to New York. If he missed this chance, in terms of time, he'd miss his window to find Elmer.

He felt slightly anxious and impatient. That was why he'd said the name, even though he'd picked up on the possibility that the villagers' "demon" might in fact be Elmer himself from their conversation.

However, Maiza had clearly set himself in opposition to the villagers, and (although Nile would only have brought it on himself) he couldn't pull Czes and Sylvie in. They might be immortal, but they weren't immune to pain or suffering.

Just as he turned back to Sylvie and the others, signaling his intent to become a decoy with his eyes—he saw something in his periphery.

The something was on the road, outside the village, far beyond the car from Maiza's perspective. Three horses were approaching them from opposite the forest they'd just left. A small figure sat atop each one, and all of them seemed to be dressed in red.

Still facing back, Maiza stopped moving. The villagers trying to restrain him also noticed the three horses and their riders, and they gulped.

"Hey... The messengers are here."

"Lower your weapons!"

"Dammit, they weren't supposed to come today..."

"These people must really be the demon's..."

As they muttered, some lowered their guns, while others rushed into their houses in a panic and slammed the doors. The many presences that had been watching from the corners of the road vanished as if by magic. In the midst of the clamor that had descended over the area, only the village leader and his henchmen stood their ground, glaring at the figures in red.

"What? What happened?"

"Hmm?"

Sylvie and Nile didn't seem to understand what was going on, but at the sound of hooves behind them, they turned around as well.

The three horses came to a halt at the same time, about ten yards beyond the car on which Nile was standing. The horses' riders were women; from their appearance, they were still of an age where they could be called young girls. Their faces were similar, and Maiza's group decided that they must be sisters or something similar.

All three of them wore clothes made from bright red fabric with accents of pure white cloth around the sleeve cuffs. The outfits looked almost as if they'd been based on Santa Claus's costume, clashing terribly with the villagers' old-fashioned clothes.

"Master Dez."

One of the riders dismounted, gazing back rather uneasily at the village headman glaring at her.

“These individuals are Master Elmer’s honored guests. We’ll escort them to the castle.”

“You little...”

In response, the headman watched the three girls resentfully.

It wasn’t the terror he’d shown toward Maiza and Nile. The expression on his face was simple annoyance.

“Please withdraw. These instructions come from Master Elmer.”

“.....”

For a short while, the village headman kept glaring at the girl. Then he clicked his tongue in such a way that she was sure to hear it and signaled to those around him with his chin.

Obediently, the young people—who’d stayed until the very end—also turned and started down the road.

The appearance of the three girls had abruptly plunged the entrance of the village and its series of disturbances into silence.

The atmosphere was indescribably odd. Maiza and the others weren’t sure what to say to the sudden interlopers either, and silence continued to circulate between them.

The girl who’d spoken first was the one to break it. Setting her foot in her horse’s stirrup, she turned to Maiza’s group and addressed them timidly:

“Um...if you’d come with us, we, erm... We would really appreciate it. This place— isn’t safe.”



CHAPTER 2
JOY ANGER SORROW FUN
Czeslaw Meyer

CHAPTER 2

JOY ANGER SORROW FUN

Czeslaw Meyer

On a road that ran through the forest...

“What do you think, Maiza?”

Sylvie was the first to respond to Czes’s uneasy question.

“It’s fine. Maiza doesn’t mind at all that you ran away right off the bat.”

“N-not that! I was asking what he thought of those girls!”

“Let’s see... Personally, I think the one in the middle would be perfect for you.”

“No! Sylvie, quit teasing me! I know you know what I mean!”

“Ahhh, you really are adorable, Czes.”

The boy’s face had gone bright red, and once again, Sylvie wrapped her arms around his neck from behind.

As he watched them and laughed, Maiza answered Czes’s question.

“It should be fine, I think. From what they said, it sounds as though Elmer is up ahead.”

After the trouble at the village entrance, Maiza’s group had decided to follow the girls in red. If the villagers’ reactions were any indication, the “monster” they’d mentioned was definitely Elmer. They didn’t know how this situation had come about, but, figuring they’d find out once they met him, the four of them had agreed to go after the horses.

Nile was lying down behind the rear seat again. He’d pulled a thick blanket over his head and gone to sleep.

“Listen, though, I’m not sure how to put it, but... Don’t those girls seem a little odd? They don’t talk much, and compared to the villagers... I mean, the color of their hair is the same and everything, but it’s like they’re from a different country.”

“Well... If you put it that way, that village is quite odd itself.”

Maiza outlined the situation of a few moments ago, putting the facts in order.

“I mentioned ‘traveling’ at first, to see how they reacted. They

didn't seem to know this was private land, either."

"Now that you mention it, you're right."

"If they'd known, they could have settled the matter simply by telling us, 'You're on private land. Get out.' We *are* trespassing, so we would have had no excuse. Besides...although they were speaking the official language, their intonation and some of the words they used were subtly different from normal. I suppose it seemed...rather archaic."

"The village isn't on any maps, after all. They're probably a cult or something like that, don't you think?"

Czes suggested it bluntly. Maiza considered the words shortly, then shook his head.

"They didn't seem like it. If it was just a religious sect, they wouldn't call the monster—well, probably Elmer—both 'demon' *and* 'monster.' Their terms weren't unified."

"In other words... It's an ordinary village?"

"I don't think that's the case, either. That headman... I felt something strange about him as well. The other villagers seemed merely frightened, but...he was a bit peculiar. The way he immediately called us 'outsiders,' for example. Though I suppose of everyone in the village, he did seem to be the one who *knew the most about the village itself*."

Remembering the man's hate-filled eyes, Maiza cut the steering wheel with a bemused expression.

Sounding bored, Czes offered a simple answer. "He *is* the head of the village, after all. That's only natural, isn't it?"

"No, that isn't what I meant. It was something more fundamental than... Ah. That seems to be our destination."

Maiza, frowning, had been about to say something when he spotted "it" through the gaps in the trees ahead of them and commented with some surprise.

At Maiza's words, Czes turned to look. Sylvie leaned out from the backseat, too, bringing her face even with Czes's, and peered ahead. What they saw was—

An old castle.

It was a fortress protected by stone walls, the kind appearing in children's stories and fantasy novels, or in the popular video games of a few years ago.

That said, it wasn't all that big. Its size made it seem less like a royal bastion and more like a fort for bandits or pirates.

There wasn't much ornamentation, and its overall impression was undeniably rough. However, the haphazard arrangement of its few windows suggested that the design of the interior might be rather complex. Despite its relatively old appearance, its exterior didn't seem

to have crumbled badly anywhere.

"It's in the same style as the castles of Luxembourg...or maybe Belgium, isn't it? It has particular similarities to Luxembourg's Vianden Castle. Granted, this one is much smaller."

After Maiza stated his impressions matter-of-factly, Czes provided his own with a tense expression.

"It isn't like the Northern European school of architecture. Besides...it doesn't look that old, somehow. I doubt it's been here a hundred years."

Except for its entrance, the castle was surrounded by thick woods, and even on foot, the way would probably be rough going.

In front of the castle was a gate like the ones of old mansions. The three horses ahead of them ran through the open gate—then disappeared within the grounds.

"...I wonder if it's all right to take the car in."

After some slight hesitation, Maiza drove through the entry and stopped near the center of the courtyard.

Getting out of the car and taking a closer look at the castle, he murmured with mild disbelief:

"This is..."

"...Well, that settles it. It's definitely Elmer in there."

Her eyes wide with similar amazement, Sylvie spoke with absolute confidence.

What had prompted Maiza's involuntary sigh was the assorted Christmas decorations adorning the castle door and every single window.

They weren't the sort that were sold commercially. They were handmade, using only materials that could be found in the forest and the village. No two windows had the same type of decoration, and all the designs were fanciful and complicated.

"True, Elmer was the only one on that ship who'd do anything this elaborate."

Czes didn't seem particularly impressed, but Sylvie was examining each of the ornaments in turn with great interest. An uninformed observer might have thought someone had switched their minds.

"You're right," Sylvie replied with awe. "Elmer's about the only one who'd be fine with using decorations this mismatched... Out of the immortals who were on the ship, anyway."

"...In any case, let's go in. I don't believe the young ladies from earlier are coming back. Sylvie, wake Nile, please."

"All right."

While Sylvie was opening the back of the car, Maiza and Czes stood at the castle's entrance.

It was a huge door with proper hinges, and it struck an odd

contrast with the stone exterior. The castle really must have been built comparatively recently.

They knocked several times, but there was no response from inside. Since they were already trespassing on private land, Maiza and Czes decided to open the door.

“Excuse us.”

It wasn’t locked. A decoration shaped like Santa Claus with reindeer swayed a little, and the hinges of the heavy door creaked loudly. After a moment’s hesitation, the pair stepped through the door into the atrium.

Inside, walls and a floor made of the same stone as the exterior spread out before them, and there was no particular ornamentation to speak of. However, the staircase near the back of the entryway wasn’t stone. From the look of the door in the corner of the room, too, it really wasn’t an old building. All in all, it seemed like a nineteenth-century mansion.

“It’s unbalanced. It’s almost as if it was built to look old from the outside, on purpose.”

“You’re right. It’s like some sort of museum, or—”

Creee eeeeeeee ee eeeeak...

Just as Maiza was about to chime in with his thoughts, the hinges groaned behind them, and the door slammed shut.

At the same time, the window shutters rattled closed, and the entrance was plunged into gloomy darkness.

“?!”

There was no one behind them. Czes hastily put a hand on the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

As if they had stumbled into a horror movie, solemn laughter echoed from above their heads.

“Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh...”

The creepy laugh reverberated in the entryway, making it hard to pinpoint its origin.

“Pitiful little lambs... Welcome to the accursed castle of the accursed forest. I suppose you let the decorations outside lull you into a false sense of security, but it was foolish of you. You will serve as fuel for my power—”

The theatrical lines bore down on Maiza and Czes, but after sharing a glance, they spoke in unison:

“...Elmer?”

“Oho, so you know my name, do you? You must have heard it from the villagers. I applaud your courage in calling the name of a known demon so boldly! However, know that resistance is—”

“No, I mean, it’s you, Elmer. Isn’t it?” Czes asked.

“It’s me, it’s me!” Maiza shouted.

“...entirely futile— Hmm? Uh...huh? That’s weird.”

The speaker seemed to have noticed something. The hoarse voice that had echoed through the darkness made an abrupt, drastic shift into a young man’s clear voice.

“It really is you, then! What has it been, about two hundred ninety years?”

Maiza called with more energy than usual, unable to hide his joy. Czes didn’t look as delighted as his companion, but, smiling wryly, he murmured into the void:

“You haven’t changed a bit. I can tell even without seeing you.”

A brief silence flowed through the gloom. Just as the echoes of their voices died completely, a startled shout burst through the darkness. “*Hang on! Don’t tell me... Is that—could that possibly be—Czes, and...Maiza?!*”

All at once, the shouting voice *dropped down from above them*.

A thump sounded in front of Maiza and Czes, and a human shape abruptly appeared in the shadows.

“Heeeeee! The windows! Open all the shutters, would you?!”

No sooner had the figure shouted than the closed shutters began to rattle open. As if it were some trick of the wind, all the windows let in the light at once, although no one was near them.

“Neat, isn’t it? I made it so you can work ’em by pulling a single rope at a distance!”

As the figure proudly told them about the shutter mechanism, the light from outside revealed his full shape.

“Good lord, it really has been ages! Let me see your fa—”

Maiza’s words and emotions abruptly froze at the sight of the now-illuminated figure.

The young man was dressed just as strangely as Nile.

He wore pitch-black from head to toe, and he had a rough sack over his head, with holes cut out for the eyes. In Japanese terms, it was a clumsy imitation of a *kuroko*, the traditional, black-clad stagehand.

“.....What are you wearing?”

“Hmm? Ah! Wow, sorry about that! I figured if I did this, it would look like there was a coal-black shadow writhing in the gloom, and it would be easier to scare my guests! Ha-ha-ha.”

Laughing lightly, the man pulled the bag off his head. He’d been thorough: Even the gloves he wore were dyed black.

“Aah, it was hard to breathe in that. Geez, guys, c’mon... I haven’t had guests in forever, and I went all out, you know.”

The one that had appeared from under the sack was blond, blue-eyed, slightly sweaty, and smiling.

He wasn't a particularly handsome young guy, but he wasn't ugly either. His features were perfectly ordinary, and the childlike smile suited them.

On seeing this, Maiza finally relaxed. Setting his hands on Elmer's shoulders, he put his elation at their reunion into words. His childlike eyes seemed ready to spill over with tears of joy at the slightest provocation.

"Oh, you really—you *really* haven't changed, have you!"

"Ha-ha! Hey, it's Maiza! It's actually Maiza! What'll I do, huh, Czes? What'll I—? Wait, whoa, if it isn't Czes! Geez, it's actually Czes! What do I do, Maiza?! I doubt my whole body could express this joy with anything less than an explosion, but unfortunately, I'm not equipped with a fuse or a powder train, and I bet it'd hurt anyway, so I'll pass! But really, whoa, what'll I do, seriously, what should I do, what do I do?"

"First, I think calming down would be best."

After they had cooled each other's excitement, Maiza remembered what had happened a moment ago and laughed in amazement. "Honestly... What's this 'keh-keh-keh' business, at your age? I was embarrassed just listening to you."

"Huh? Was there something weird about that?"

"You didn't notice?"

Elmer seemed genuinely mystified, and Czes, who'd left a little distance between himself and the pair as they celebrated their reunion, responded to his question with another question.

"If you were trying to scare us, you failed miserably. In fact, you just made us laugh."

He'd been blunt, but upon hearing those words, Elmer grinned and burst out with laughter of his own.

"Is that right! That's a huge success! Not everybody can go in for a scare and get a smile instead! That's at least eighty percent more fantastic!"

"Are you familiar with the phrase *wry smile*?"

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha! Well, hey, it's fine! Nah, c'mon, seriously, you surprised me! What a shock, I was really startled! What are you two doing here? Did you know I was here when you came?"

Hugging Maiza lightly, the young man grinned and thumped him on the back.

"Huh?"

Those words left Czes and Maiza confused. Hadn't this man, Elmer C. Albatross, known they'd come to the village? They'd assumed that was why he'd gone out of his way to send someone over to pick them up.

"Didn't you know we were here, Elmer?"

“Oh, nonono, all I heard was that outsiders had come to the village. They’re clannish, see, plus their nerves are all on edge thanks to me, so I thought I’d hide you here before anything ugly happened to you!”

It was quite a long way from here to the village. Who in the world had told him? And in any case, why was he living in this castle while the villagers called him a demon?

There were all sorts of things they wanted to ask him about, but for the moment, Maiza and Czes opted to bask in the delight of their reunion.

Just then, a knock echoed in the entryway. Apparently Sylvie and Nile were stranded outside the door.

“Huh? What’s this? Is somebody here besides you guys, Maiza?”

“Yes, two others—also old friends.”

As Maiza informed him happily, Czes mischievously broke in.

“Who do you think they are?”

“Huh? I wonder... In terms of people who’d probably be friends with you guys, I’d guess Begg or somebody like that... Well, never mind, yesyesyesyes, coming! I’ll get it open right away.”

His curiosity mounting like a small child’s, Elmer unlocked the door, heart beating faster. It was rigged up the same way as the windows: The door could be closed from a distance with a rope or something similar, at which point it would lock automatically.

Smiling, he opened the door to reveal...

“Elmer! Is that really you, Elmer?!”

“Hey.”

...A bewitching, fey beauty, and a man who wore a mask over his well-bandaged face.

Creeeeee eeee ee eeaaak.

Slam.

Elmer slowly shut the door and turned to Maiza.

“...Who is it?”

“An excellent question.”

Unusually for him, Maiza was wearing a rather impish smile. Beside him, Czes was desperately biting back a grin of his own.

Cre-e-e-e-e-aaaak.

The door was forced open from the outside, and two people Elmer didn’t recognize entered.

“Aaaaaaaugh, strangers! People I don’t know are just walking right in!”

“Come on, Elmer, that’s mean! Don’t shut us out without even saying hello!” Although Sylvie’s tone was angry, she couldn’t quite

hide a thin smile.

"You cur. Must you jest even during our reunion?" In contrast to her, Nile was actually cross.

"Wh-who are you?! Argh, not only do you march into my castle, you stomp your way into my heart—! Who the heck are you?!"

Seeing that Elmer was genuinely confused, Nile came to remember the state of his own head. "Hmm, I see... I did not wear a mask like this before. I suppose your confusion is only reasonable. However, let me just say this: Know me by my voice."

With that haughty command, Elmer finally recognized the man behind the mask.

"...Nile? Is that Nile?!"

"So you finally caught on."

Elmer took a good, hard look at Nile, who was nodding in satisfaction. Then he turned to Sylvie.

"Then you're— Of course!"

"Surprised? It's no wonder: I'm completely different."

"Huey, right?! You're Huey Laforet! Why are you wearing women's clothes?!"

"Wrong!"

At the off-the-mark answer, Sylvie slumped, and Maiza and the others laughed out loud.

"Huh? You're kidding. You're not? Huey was the only person this gorgeous on that ship..."

"She's Sylvie. Sylvie Lumiere."

Laughing, Maiza revealed the secret.

Sylvie looked tired. "Oh, honestly... I was the only woman on that boat, you know."

"Sylvie?"

Elmer stared at the woman in front of him. Then he spun to face Maiza and shouted, "It's a lie! Sylvie wasn't a transcendent beauty like this! She was a snub-nosed kid who looked like she'd just come up from the country!"

"Should I be happy about this or upset?"

Sylvie wore a complicated expression. After another good look at her face, Elmer muttered:

"Well, no, but... Even if she switched her glasses for contacts, Sylvie wasn't this tall, and her figure was pretty short on curves, and, I mean, she was seventeen then! No matter how you look at this lady, she's over twenty! Czes hasn't grown, so there's no way Sylvie would —"

"She didn't drink it then. The elixir of immortality."

Elmer's doubts were natural for someone who'd known her before, but Maiza interrupted and briefly explained. Picking up where he'd

left off, Sylvie began to tell the story, sounding somehow entertained.

"I became an alchemist because I wanted eternal beauty. I got the liquor that would bring me eternal life on that ship, but unfortunately, I was only seventeen, and I wasn't fully grown yet. So I stealthily poured the liquor into a little bottle, spent several years polishing myself, and *then* I drank it."

At that explanation, Elmer dubiously looked her up and down.

"...In other words, you're the 'twenty-something Sylvie' version?"

"What do you mean, 'version'? Well, I suppose it's a bit like that."

After thinking a little, Elmer set a hand on Sylvie's shoulder and spoke. His eyes were filled with pity.

"Sylvie. Before we rejoice over our reunion, tell me one thing, and be honest."

"What is it?"

Under Elmer's suddenly serious gaze, Sylvie's pulse quickened slightly.

"Don't worry. No matter what the answer is, I won't abandon you. We've got eternity, and you can atone for your sins little by little."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just give it to me straight. Exactly how much blood, from how many little kids, did you bathe in to get so beautiful?!"

"I really hope you know you how incredibly rude that was."

Sylvie raised her arm, preparing to slap Elmer's cheek. Evading it by a hair, he turned back to Maiza and the others.

"Well, all joking aside..."

"Tell me exactly where the joking started and ended. Please."

"I actually knew you were Sylvie the moment I saw you. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

Sighing wordlessly, Sylvie raised her right hand high in the air again.

"Whoops... Huh?"

As Elmer tried to back up to avoid it, his body was abruptly pinned in place.

Maiza had hold of his right arm, while Nile's hand gripped his left.

"Elmer, Elmer... That was really unkind."

"Let me just say this: A slap for that is inevitable."

Firmly trapped between them, his legs rose slightly into the air.

"Huh? Wait, uh, seriously?"

As Elmer turned pale, Sylvie's palm bore down on him in an elegant arc, and—

With the sharp, pleasant *slap* echoing in his ears, Czes stood a little apart from the others, gazing up into space.

"Elmer and Sylvie haven't changed a bit."

Czes murmured sadly so the others couldn't hear, seeming oddly

grown-up.

“—So I’m the only one who has...?”





They're smiling. Master Elmer and the people from elsewhere who came to the castle.

They're smiling as if they're enjoying themselves, really having fun.

Master Elmer hasn't changed at all. It's the same smile he always gives me.

But

When he heard that, Elmer was silent for a short while. A hush hung over the five of them, and Elmer bowed his head, his face lit red by the glow from the fireplace.

A few seconds later, when he raised his head to look at Maiza's group...he was smiling.

"I see. That's sad, but I'm happy."

"Huh?"

Looking as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Elmer leaned far back in his seat and began to explain.

"You see, frankly, it was possible that I'd spend eternity without ever seeing any of my old friends again. However, today, all of you came. That means the worst-case scenario improved to 'everyone besides the five of us is dead.' But now you're telling me that there are other survivors... Yeah, it's okay to smile. I think in this situation, it's fine to smile."

"You're quite the optimist."

"No, it isn't that. Smiling's the only way I can mourn everyone's deaths, that's all. To be honest, I'm no good at being sad. I'm bad at it. You could even say I hate it. Oh, just so you know, I have absolutely no intention of forgetting the people who died. To help me keep that resolution, Maiza, would you tell me something? Tell me who else is still alive."

Giving a long-winded excuse for why he wasn't grieving, Elmer prompted Maiza to continue. At Elmer's reaction, Maiza gave a smile that was both mildly appalled and relieved.

"You really haven't changed a bit. Yes, the other survivors are Begg, Huey, Victor, and—"

"Oh, Huey's still all right, too? Victor slipped into the FBI and caught Huey, didn't he? I read about it in the papers, ages back."

Elmer smiled faintly, basking in some nostalgic memory.

"What's Huey up to now? I heard rumors that they'd jailed him, but his term must be over by now, right?"

"We don't know, either. I haven't heard that he was eaten, so by now he may be continuing his experiments somewhere."

"He's a dyed-in-the-wool experiment junkie, that guy. In a way, he was more of an alchemist than any of the rest of us... Oops, sorry, I interrupted you."

Seeing Maiza's complicated expression, Elmer hastily encouraged him to continue.

"No, no, I don't mind. And then, we still don't know where the last one is, but—it's Denkurou, Tougou Denkurou. You remember him, don't you? He was the only Asian there."

"Yeah, 'Ninja.'"

"Ninja?"

“That’s the nickname I gave him... Wait, what? Maiza, you guys haven’t seen him yet?”

At that, the four turned to Elmer, eyes wide.

“You *have*?!”

Maiza’s shout held a complicated stew of emotion.

The young man shrugged, seeming a bit troubled. “We just ran into each other by chance, about ten years back. It was at this Edo Wonderland something-or-other place in Japan, and he was dressed like a ninja. I haven’t seen him since, so I don’t know if he’s still okay.”

“You’re kidding... We searched Japan first thing. Even when we were on the ship, he kept saying he wanted to go back to Japan, so we looked in and around his hometown—”

“When was this?”

“About twenty years ago, I think.”

On hearing that, Elmer flapped his hands and grinned.

“Oh, no, no, that’s no good. He only made it back to Japan about a decade ago. See, apparently Ninja tried to *walk* back to Japan from America. He got into some sort of trouble up at the North Pole and spent two hundred fifty years as a Popsicle.”

“.....”

“A Soviet nuclear sub found him, and while he was running around with the KGB on his tail, he tried to cut across Germany and got shot at the wall. It sounded pretty rough. Then someone in East Germany hid him, and after the wall came down, he finally made it back to Japan, or that’s what I heard. And apparently, he was terribly shocked at how his country had changed. His family had died out long before the war—about the time the country was opened to the rest of the world. Since then, it sounds like he’s been wandering all around Japan.”

“A grand adventure.”

Nile’s comment wrapped up the subject of Tougou for the present. After a moment’s silence, with no hesitation, Elmer breezily cut to the heart of the matter.

“I didn’t hear Szilard’s name in there.”

At the mention of that man, with the exception of Maiza, they all looked away. Each seemed to feel something different.

Szilard Quates. The oldest of the alchemists who’d gained immortality had been the one to take advantage of the curse allowing them to prey on one another and had attempted to devour all their knowledge.

After a pause, Maiza curtly described the current situation:

“Szilard is dead.”

When Elmer heard the unembellished bottom line, his expression

of Nauru.”

“I’m being serious.”

Elmer attempted to turn him aside with banter, but Maiza was completely serious. "What on earth is this village? Why do they call you a demon and fear you? Are you really exploiting the villagers somehow? And what in the world are those girls—"

“Don’t say it all at once! You’re making my head spin! Spin-in-in-n-n-n-n-n-n—”

Clutching his head in both hands, Elmer began to tremble violently, right on the spot.

Brrrr-brrrr-brrrr-brrrr-brrrr-brrrr-brrrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrr.

The vibration gradually accelerated, and just when his head was moving fast enough to leave afterimages—

It fell off.

“AH?!”

Everyone in the room stopped breathing. The head rolled partway down the black clothes and disappeared into the cloth, and ferocious smoke billowed out of the place where the head had been.

In the blink of an eye, the smoke had filled the room, temporarily making it very hard to see.

When they inhaled it, they felt a slight pressure in their lungs, but the gas didn't seem to be poisonous. Determination made, Maiza and the others crouched down and checked on Elmer.

The smoke cleared rapidly, and in the midst of a faint haze, they saw...Elmer's black clothes lying in the middle of the room, along with a small tube that seemed to be the source of the smoke. And that was all.

“He’s as clever as always...”

Maiza watched the currents in the smoke that still hung in the room, but none seemed to be moving. He'd probably slipped out, somehow, during that brief moment.

“They often do that in stage magic, don’t they? Escape from their own clothes.”

Examining the workings of the fabric, Czes murmured a dull comment.

Just then—

"A game! Let's play a game!"

Elmer's clear voice abruptly sounded in the drawing room.

The announcement rebounded around the space with great enthusiasm, striking strange echoes across the stone walls.

"It would be a great help if you stopped playing around."

“Starting now, I’ll run away from all of you for a while and continue my work at the same time! If you manage to catch me, as a reward, I’ll

answer those questions!"

"Elmer."

"It's no good, Maiza. You know nothing works once Elmer gets like this."

Czes spoke from beside him, and Maiza nodded as though he'd already given up.

"There's really no help for it, is there..."

"Okay! Wonderful! That's just like you to be so reasonable, Maiza. All right: Once again, let me greet you! Welcome to this village, a place left behind by both history and society, a place that has always been a world apart! In other words, this is another dimension, a fantasy! I sincerely hope you'll throw yourselves into your roles!"

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! A laugh echoed around the room, gradually fading.

Taking a seat, Maiza heaved a big, resigned sigh, as if to say *Good grief*. "Well, I was very used to this sort of thing in New York."

"Unlike Elmer, though, Isaac and Miria were more spur-of-the-moment about it."

"Who are they?" Unfamiliar with the names, Nile lobbed a question at Czes and Maiza, but...

Just as Elmer's laugh disappeared completely, a knock sounded.

In the midst of the surrounding stone walls, the wooden door seemed odd and wrong. Through it, they could faintly hear a voice that seemed to belong to a girl.

"Um...I've made some tea."

"Oh, thank you. Come in."

The room's rightful master had vanished, so for the moment, Maiza answered in his place.

"Excuse me."

The individual who entered was a girl in red clothes, as they'd expected, but she wasn't one of the girls on the horses a short while ago. Although she looked very similar, her haircut and facial features were subtly different.

Elmer's absence seemed to bewilder the girl. She looked restlessly around the room with troubled eyes.

"Hmm. Elmer's words aside, I dare say we could ask this girl, could we not?"

Nile's proposal wasn't anything that had required "daring" to say, and Czes trotted up to her with a childlike gait to pose the question.

"Say, miss? How do you and the other girls know Mr. Elmer?"

He'd asked directly, using his privilege as a child, and the girl's answer was frank as well.

"I am...*a sacrifice*."



Just how long had the village been here? There was no way for the ordinary people who lived in it to answer that. The elderly among them had sometimes acted as if they knew, but they had already passed on of old age.

For the generation of villagers who currently occupied the settlement, this place and everything in it had been their world for as long as they could remember, and the dense forest around it had been like the basin of the waterfall at the end of the world.

Those who had doubts had ventured into the forest, one after another, and their shallow curiosity had been shattered, along with its faint glimmer of hope.

They didn't even notice that the density of the trees in the forest was abnormal. They didn't know what normal was.

The unusually thick woods extended too far to get through on foot. Several people had given up and turned back, and many people had never returned again. The forest confused their sense of direction, and it was rumored that it made them walk the same path, over and over. There was a long tunnel on the single road through the woods, but its entrance was closed up tightly—and recently, apparently, the whole hill had collapsed.

There was only one other road. It led into the distant depths of the forest, and from time to time, the traders arrived from it.

However, there was something called a “checkpoint” there, and nothing could get through it except the iron truck the traders rode in, a vehicle that moved of its own accord. Once, several people had hidden in that truck and headed outside...but in the end, not one of them had come back.

In the end, those who had learned the dangers of the outside world warned their children.

“Outside” was dangerous. There was nothing out there. This village was all there was.

The children knew these were lies. However, the mood in the village made them afraid to say so out loud... And on top of that, they had acquired a definite fear of anything outside the village.

From time to time, silver birds flew over, very high in the sky. The enormous creatures made strange sounds, and they frightened people as much as demonic messengers might have.

However, except for that, the village wasn't a difficult place to live. They were self-sufficient with regard to the majority of their crops, and the traders brought in oil and fuel. The traders themselves were proof positive of an outside world, but the people stubbornly

pretended not to notice this. The traders said nothing about “outside,” never got out of their truck, and only rarely even opened the windows.

There was a tacit understanding that they were not to investigate the merchants, and the previous village headman had banned attempts to go outside.

Everyone in the village was satisfied with this, and everything had gone well.

There had been problems of a sort. Although they could never go beyond the woods, no matter how badly they wanted to, sometimes there were visitors who claimed to have come from there. They’d all wandered in by accident, some of them unable to speak the language. However...most of the villagers couldn’t understand the concept of “outsiders.” After all, “outside” wasn’t supposed to exist in the first place. These people were only demons sent to lead them astray.

As a matter of fact, several young people had been deceived by the first outsider who’d come to this place. The villagers had tried to stop them, but the youngsters had shaken off the cries of their elders and departed with the stranger for “outside.” They’d believed in the outside world that the visitor had told them about.

And they, too, had never returned to the village.

A demon had seduced them. That was what everyone said.

Ever since then, when outsiders came, the denizens of the village made it *as though they’d never been*.

It only happened once in ten-odd years, but either they were chased out of the settlement immediately—or quite literally erased from the world.

They were afraid of the outside—or possibly of denying their current way of life—and they’d stayed shut away in this forest voluntarily.

There was the issue of population decline to worry about, but everyone had been able to live in relative happiness, spending their days in peace and quiet.

Or they had until the demon named Elmer had arrived, five years ago.

And now, in the present...

On the night Maiza’s group came to the village, the old-timers had assembled in the meeting hall at the village’s center and were crowded around a large desk. They all looked grave, and several of them appeared frightened.

This wasn’t a tame village meeting. A weighty tension dominated

the large wooden room, as if a forest fire were bearing down on the village.

“What are you going to do, Dez?”

“I didn’t see it myself. Are the rumors in the village true?!”

“They say there are more demons now! Is that right?!”

“What’s to become of our village?! Have they already asked for something?”

At the villagers’ grief-stricken cries, the headman, Dez Nibiru, only maintained his dour expression.

“Do something! There are four more of them now?! Are they all demons?!”

Instead of the village chief, a young man dressed as a hunter answered that question. He was the one who’d put a bullet into Maiza’s leg that afternoon. “Yeah. I saw it. It was just like *him*. I dunno about the other three, but the one with glasses is a demon for sure!”

“Besides, the man who wore that terrible mask was speaking a strange language. Those must have been words only they understand. A cursed tongue!”

“B-but wait, is that beautiful girl a demon, too?”

“Well, uh...p-probably. Or, no, I guess she might not be, but...”

The individuals hesitantly talking about Sylvie were the ones who’d been bewitched earlier in the day.

“And then, he hid right away, but...there was a kid, too, wasn’t there?”

“Yeah. Including him, there are four of ’em. Anyhow, Elmer sent for them, and they headed for that castle. B-but that thing they were riding in... Could they be related to the traders somehow?”

“The traders have nothing to do with this. The question is, what do we do next?! Isn’t that right, Headman?!”

At that point, the villagers all fell silent, waiting for Dez to contribute.

Dez heaved a great sigh, then said as if speaking to himself: “I wanted to catch them before they made contact with him, but... From the way he sent that welcoming committee, we should assume he knew they’d arrived. In that case, the problem is, what’s he going to do to us for turning guns on them?”

“We know that! That’s why we’re asking what we should do!”

“We have no choice! We’ll have to wait for their demands! Any discussion will take place after that!” the headman said angrily, but the villagers refused to back down.

“That’s easy enough to say! What if they come to take their revenge once night falls?!”

“Besides, if he asks for more than he already takes, whether it’s

food or something else...we'll have to dip into the village's stores."

"Are you telling us to starve to death?!"

"That's irresponsible! You're the headman! Do something!"

"Silence!"

Dez slammed his fist down on the desk in front of him and yelled, veins bulging.

"What do you want me to do?! Use your heads before you howl at me! Do you have a plan? Or can you kill those demons or drive them off?! The only difference between you and me is that I'm the headman and you're not! That's all! Should I surrender this post to one of you, right now? I'm sure you'll come up with a fine plan to counter them and lead the village!"

His angry roar left the villagers unable to respond. In the end, aside from waiting for an opportunity, none of them had a plan for getting out of the situation.

Just as they thought the silence would remain unbroken, they heard a young voice from behind Dez.

"You don't have to say it like that, Father."

"Feldt, huh? It's none of your business."

A boy of about fifteen or sixteen stood in the doorway. There was still something childlike about his features, but his eyes shone with courage.

"The villagers are anxious. I am, too, for that matter... That's why everyone's counting on you, Father."

"....."



“This is no time for fighting. At times like this, we need to band together to protect the village.”

The ingenuous speech of the chief’s son could have been taken as immature, but at his words, the villagers gradually began to calm down.

“For now, as my father says, I think we should watch them. The child and the woman may simply be captives—and we may get a chance to figure out what their weakness is. Let’s pretend to listen to their orders for the moment and make them careless.”

At the boy’s suggestion, the villagers exchanged glances.

Before long, somebody mumbled, “Well...we could.” The murmur spread, and it was decided that the status quo should be maintained.

“Father, you’re all right with that, too, aren’t you?”

“Do whatever you want.”

Maybe he was irritated that his son had upstaged him. Dez stood, looking disgruntled.

One of the villagers spoke to his back with visible unease.

“But, Headman, the real problem is going to come when they ask for more sacrifices than they already have.”

“I know that. We’ve only got one left. When the sacrifices are gone, *we’ll have to actually give him a village girl...*”



As I make my way back to the shed where I sleep, a bellow echoes from the village meeting hall. It’s Master Dez.

Have I made another mistake without being aware of it?

My heart feels heavy. Even so, I have to check.

The floor of the meeting hall is raised off the ground. As I climb the low stairway, I sense many people inside. They are probably discussing Master Elmer. In that case, perhaps the yell didn’t have anything to do with me after all.

Just as I reach the door to the building, it flies open toward me.

Impact.

The door crashes into me and knocks me to the floor.

There is an intense tingling in my nose. When I touch it, lots of blood is coming out.

“Dammit, this door’s hung real bad. Hunh?”

Above me, I hear Master Dez’s voice. Then sharp pain runs through me, again and again.

“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!”

Master Dez is glaring right at me and opening the door into me, over and over.

I twist to get away from the pain and somehow escape the direct hits from the door.

However, as I start to stand, I lose my balance again—and this time I fall between the open door and the entrance. Then a shock runs through my legs, as if they are being crushed between.

“Argh, *now the door won’t shut right!*”

The ferocious pain strikes again and again. The pain the pain the pain the pain the pain the pain the pain the pain the pain the pain hurts hurts hurts hurts hurts ow ow ow ow ow

Why are all the people who come to the village from “outside” kind to me?

They don’t hit me. They don’t kick me. Even if I sleep in a bed, they don’t get mad.

I used to think, *Maybe it’s only Master Elmer; maybe he’s special*, and put up with everything, but...

I’ve learned.

I know about a possibility that a different world lies outside this village, outside this forest.

If that’s true, why do things like this have to happen to me?

Master Elmer once told me, “Some places are better than this, but some are dozens of times worse, too.” However, if there’s even the slightest possibility, I want to cling to it.

I want to leave this village. It wouldn’t matter where I went; if I could get by without being hit, if I could live without being hurt, if I could go without feeling lonely, then anywhere, anywhere—

But that’s a dream I mustn’t have.

A wish that will never come true.

For me, leaving here means dying.

If I already know it’s an impossible dream, I shouldn’t have it, shouldn’t have it, shouldn’t—

I’m sad. I very nearly resented Master Elmer, the person trying to teach me happiness, to teach me how to smile.

I remember. I remember vividly.

This emotion is hate.

I was about to hate Master Elmer, before I hated the villagers.

That’s sadder than anything.

I feel as though I’m a creature that shouldn’t be allowed to exist...



December 23

Night

The old castle

Night had fallen over the area.

The air of the already-cold forest climate shivered in the freezing, transparent darkness.

The old castle stood deep in those woods. Most of its roof was flat, and it was possible to walk across it normally. However, in just one place—on top of the watchtower jutting out on the south side—it was conical and impossible to reach in the usual way.

One man was leaning back against the slope of that rooftop cone, gazing at the stars.

“Elmer.”

Hearing the call, the man quietly turned in the direction of the voice.

“Ah!”

His eyes landed on the upper half of a small boy. The edge of the roof hid the boy’s lower section as he struggled to crawl up onto the tower.

After a brief pause, Czes managed to pull himself up.

The boy huffed out a tired breath, and Elmer praised him quite candidly.

“Good job finding the handholds by the window. Did you come on your own?”

Without answering the question, Czes looked around and murmured, “This castle really is strange. On the whole, its design is closer to what you’d see in Luxembourg, but this conical roof is common in the castles of Denmark... It’s like they cobbled it together from an assortment of castles from different regions.”

“You know a lot about this. That’s a surprise... Actually, I hadn’t noticed any of that myself.”

“I took about half of it from Maiza.”

“Ha-ha! Should we add some traditional Japanese roof tiles and protective carp statues while we’re at it?”

Grinning at the joke, Czes carefully began to walk across the sloped roof.

Timing it to his initial move, Elmer leaped to his feet in an exaggerated motion. One false step and he would have toppled to the ground headfirst, but there was no anxiety in his face.

“Heh-heh-heh! You may think you’ve got me cornered, but think again! They call me Godfoot; can you beat me if I take to my heels?”

“Where would you run up here?” Czes pointed out calmly.

Elmer looked up for a little while and pondered.

“...Huh?”

He didn’t see any roofs around that he could leap to. Even if he went for the shortest drop to the roof, if he was unlucky, broken bones would be the least of his worries.

He might have been immortal, but pain hurt. Breaking out in a cold sweat, Elmer stayed where he was with some consternation.

“Well, you know, if you come over here, I’ll head over to the other side of the cone.”

“Are you planning to go around in circles forever?”

“Want to join me in an experiment to see how many circles we have to make before we turn into butter and overturn science on a

fundamental level?”

“No, I do not.”

Czes gazed at him with mild disgust. Under the moonlight, Elmer cocked his head.

“I think the first person who hit on the idea of making tigers into butter was a genius, don’t you?”

“You don’t have to duck the issue like that. I didn’t come here to catch you. I just want to ask you about something.”

With that, Czes sat down right where he was, resting his small frame on the sloping roof.

“Ask me? I *told* you, unless you catch me, I won’t...”

“Not that. It’s something personal.”

“Hmm?” Czes’s attitude seemed to have caught Elmer’s attention, and he moved just a little closer to the boy.

“Still—you haven’t changed. You always did climb up to high places when it got dark. When we were on the ship, you scaled the mast every evening and watched the stars, didn’t you?”

“*Ohhh*, right, right, I see. That’s why you thought I’d be here, then? I didn’t think you’d find me on the first day, so I was startled.”

“Were you planning to hide for days on end...?”

Without answering, Elmer set a hand on the roof’s slope to stand straight up. From that position, he faced Czes and asked him a question in return.

“What sort of something?”

So he guessed it’s not easy to talk about.

Elmer was beaming. Registering his intentions, Czes sighed a bit uncomfortably.

Then, as if he’d made up his mind, he turned to Elmer and gave a superficial smile. However, just as he was about to begin speaking, Elmer talked over him, casually. He was laughing.

“Quit faking smiles. It doesn’t look good on you.”

“

“Apparently I was the fool here, then...”

Seeing Czes slump tiredly, Elmer finally got a handle on the situation.

“Oh, *ohhh*! I see, I see, of course; I get it. Okay. I’ve got this. I see. Come to think of it, of course you’re right. You’re already about three hundred or so. I should have thought it was weird that you were still acting like a kid. Right. Sorry, though. I didn’t notice a thing.”

At Elmer’s thoughtlessness, Czes sighed up at the starry sky. Quietly, as the moonlight illuminated his white breath, the immortal with the body of a little boy began to speak.

“It’s strange, but Maiza hasn’t said anything these past seventy years. Sylvie and Nile don’t seem to care, either.”

His eyes, still those of a child, seemed to hold some unease.

“What I want to ask is... What do you think of us?”

“Companions.”

There wasn’t the slightest fraction of a pause. Elmer spoke firmly, with no hesitation or bewilderment, the moment Czes finished his sentence.

As Czes’s eyes went round at his response, Elmer suddenly changed his mind and began muttering, groping around for the answer.

“Nononono, wait, wait, wait, wait, it sounds kinda immature to say *companions* there, and actually, it sounds like a fib coming from me. With you, Czes, *friends* might be okay, but you’re really grown-up now, and after all, you are three hundred... In that case, *tea-drinking buddy* could work. No, wait, *compatriots*, *comrades*... *fellows* would be all right, too. *The gang*... Or I could go Latin-style and use *amigo*... *a duo*... *a battery*... *teammates*... et cetera, et cetera.”

He’s actually saying “et cetera” out loud...

Naturally, Czes’s internal comeback didn’t reach Elmer, and after a bit more muttering, the man clapped his hands and said:

“Let’s look to Asia this time and go with *villains of the same stripe* —”

“No thanks. What’s that sketchy conclusion supposed to be?”

As if getting his revenge for a short while before, Czes responded before Elmer had even finished speaking.

“It’s something Denkurou said to me a while back. ‘You and Huey are no doubt villains of the same stripe,’ he said.”

“You know he can’t have meant anything good by it... Agh, I was a fool for even trying to ask you about it seriously.”

“Quit talking like Maiza, all right? Act a little more like a kid.”

At Elmer’s insensitive comment, Czes irritably spat, “Knock it off. I told you. Inside, I’m not a little brat.”

“I see. Come to think of it, you’re right. But, you know, it’s

Czes. It was obvious at a glance that there was no meaning to the action, but the man himself seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it.

“Starting around the fifteenth century, alchemists were roughly split into two camps. One was dedicated to research, and it would become the basis for science. The others were mystics who attempted to adhere to the ideals of alchemy. I guess we’d be the second type. If not, I doubt we would’ve agreed when Maiza suggested summoning a demon. Well, Huey and Szilard could’ve been both types. In other words, we’re immortal through the power of a demon, and it’s too late for us to try to bring logical thought into the picture at this point. It’s fine, just live true to your feelings—which is to say, go on and smile, Czes.”

“What I truly feel at the moment is that I’m about to explode with irritation because of you, you know.”

When Czes looked up at him with heavy-lidded eyes, Elmer immediately stopped spinning and, in contrast to the boy, opened his eyes until they were wide and round.

“Huh? Why?! Getting upset under a beautiful night sky like this isn’t good for you. You won’t get to live a long life, you know? ... Okay, understood, roger that, stop. Stop looking like you’re watching a dog spin around in circles trying to sniff itself. I get it, I’ll listen seriously. I just got a little carried away out here under the stars.”

“You’ve always been less than serious, Elmer... That’s not the only reason I’m upset. What I wanted to ask about, and what’s irritating me, is that boundless thoughtlessness of yours.”

“Heh-heh. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’m not complimenting you! I am in no way complimenting you! You always immediately try to throw people off like that... But answer this one thing seriously.”

Overawed by the intensity of the boy’s eyes, Elmer gave a troubled smile, then sat down where he was.

“What I want you to tell me is... *Why didn’t you ask who ate Szilard?*”

“.....”

Faster than Elmer could speak, the immortal who looked like a boy rapidly fired more questions at him.

“Why were you able to accept us at face value like that? We might have come here to attack you, you know! Besides, even when I touched your face—when I put my right hand on your head! You didn’t even try to get away from it! You didn’t look scared, or even suspicious! Why, *why* do you feel so little danger?! Do you think you’ll never be eaten or something? Do you think we haven’t changed a bit in all this time?!”

Czes’s tone grew more and more forceful. Elmer simply continued

to meet his questions with silence.

Then, after Czes had finished and taken a few breaths, Elmer looked straight into the boy's eyes and spoke quietly, with a shamefaced half smile.

"I forgot."

"...Huh?"

"Well, no, right, I see; that was the rule, come to think of it. If old Szilard is dead, then that was what happened. I completely forgot."

"Answer me seriously!"

Without thinking, Czes yelled at him, but Elmer's smile didn't falter.

"No, this isn't a joke, nothing like it. I actually did forget. I'm not lying."

On hearing that, Czes was well and truly dumbfounded. Elmer had always been a guy who lied and cracked pointless jokes, but when he said he wasn't lying, he really and truly wasn't.

If his nature hadn't changed one bit... Then Elmer really had forgotten the rule about devouring each other. Czes couldn't believe that. He was even deluded into thinking that his life up until now had been denied.

"...You're lying."

"No, it's true."

"You're lying! You...you were scared of being eaten, and that's why you kept running, right? That's why you're living quietly in this remote place, isn't it?!"

He shouted as if desperately trying to cling to something. Even as he listened, Elmer shook his head mercilessly.

"I wasn't wandering around the world to get away from Szilard and the other guys. Besides, even if I hadn't forgotten that rule, I would have accepted you four the same way."

"That's a lie."

"I told you, it's not a lie. And anyway, I know you four aren't the type. Even if one of you did eat Szilard, I won't reject you."

"How am I supposed to believe something like that—?!"

Just as Czes stood, attempting to glare down at Elmer... Elmer grabbed Czes's thin right wrist firmly, then set the boy's palm flat against his own head. In that position, if Czes thought *I want to eat* even slightly, Elmer's body and memories would instantly be absorbed into his right hand.

However, Czes was the one who was terrified. He tore away the hands gripping his own and yanked his sweaty palm from Elmer's head in a panic.

Czes's pulse was beating double time, and his breathing had roughened in the blink of an eye. Elmer smiled soothingly at him, his

eyes gentle.

“Believe me now?”

His expression didn't hold a trace of unease or resolve. On seeing it, Czes stood stock-still for a little while, looking dazed. As he gradually calmed down, he ground his teeth and muttered as if cursing him. That said, since his voice had never changed, only about half the resentment he actually wanted to convey came through.

“...Why...? Why are you able to do that?”

Elmer was still sitting down, and Czes asked his question insistently with a mixture of frustration and sadness.

“Why can you do things like that...? Not just you, Elmer. Maiza, and Begg, and Sylvie... When we first met again, they accepted me with absolutely no question. Things got a little interesting with Nile, but now he's let his guard down around me, too. And not only me. They've all let their guard down around each other. They all believe we'll never eat each other!” Czes yelled.

He looked down and quietly shook his head. Then, weakly and with some resignation, he continued.

“People change. I'm well aware of that. I know human nature is evil, too! ...Well, that was what I thought, but at some point, I started to doubt it. Several decades ago, I went to New York on my own. I meant to reunite with Maiza, and to eat him. But I encountered different immortals on the way, and not only there. After I arrived in New York, there was a bunch of immortals besides our companions from the ship! Can you believe it? Still, by then, that didn't matter. What truly scared me...*was the fact that they were all incredibly good people!*”



There are other immortals besides us.

This was a startling revelation for Elmer as well, but he decided not to pursue that particular issue. It was possible that Czes hadn't gotten his own feelings under control yet; he didn't seem to have noticed that he'd just revealed an important fact.

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It's not the slightest bit good! ...Remember what I said? I know better than anyone that human nature is brimming with evil."

Czes hesitated a little over the words that came next, but soon, as if he'd made up his mind, he spoke.

"...I ate Fermet."

Fermet. At that name, Elmer fell silent for a while. He hadn't spoken with him much, but if his memory served him right, the man had been Czes's guardian, one of the fellow alchemists who'd journeyed with them on the ship.

"Fermet inflicted pain and suffering on me in all sorts of ways, calling them 'experiments.' Still, I trusted him. But the pain he caused me just kept growing worse!"

The sudden confession left Elmer silent. Czes had been like a little brother or a son to the Fermet he remembered, and he hadn't thought of him as the sort of man who could do that.

"Don't you understand? The man I'd believed in all that time, the man I'd trusted even when he treated me that way... One day, out of the blue, he tried to kill me! I fought desperately, and the next thing I knew, I'd put my right hand on Fermet's head, and— Do you know the hell that came after that? Do you have any idea how it feels to know that the person I trusted had been full of warped malice, and how much it hurts to live carrying all of that inside me?! ...It made me hate the world. I decided to assume that everything, both the world and myself, was just evil incarnate. But if so...if so, why were they all good people?! It...it felt like I was the one vile person in the whole world—and you, and Maiza, and Isaac and Miria and Firo and Ennis, why are you so...all of you, all of you...all of you..."

He didn't seem able to get any more words out. He lowered his head completely and fell silent.

Elmer stayed quiet for a little while, too, but then he looked up at the stars and murmured:

"I'm jealous."

At that, Czes slowly raised his head.

"Yeah, jealous. Listen, Czes. Whether human nature is evil or good, just think of it like this: There are about six billion people on the planet, and of those, ninety-nine point nine percent are bad. However, ever since you boarded that train, you kept right on meeting

that remaining point one percent of the good people! Those are insane odds! It's such a huge win, it's like if the same lottery number came up twice in a row, and you'd bought both those tickets yourself! An asteroid's going to hit the Earth and chimpanzees will write the works of Shakespeare, y'know?"

As Elmer fired his lighthearted comments like a machine gun, Czes began to feel like an idiot for having spoken seriously. It hurt even worse because he knew that Elmer actually meant what he said, and that it wasn't just empty consolation.

"...I'm jealous of your optimism, Elmer."

"Optimism? I'm just stating the facts. While I'm at it, you're a pretty good guy yourself, Czes, so relax and just live."

"Don't try to comfort me. I'm frustrated, that's all. Nobody else has changed one bit, but I got nastier and nastier... Just me. I'm the only one who changed. I can't stand it."

As if to say he had nothing more to discuss, Czes began to walk toward the ladderlike handholds he'd used to climb up. Elmer spoke to his back, mystified.

"You're a strange one. If you're going to get all worked up over not being good—why not just be good?"

"Don't act like it's easy."

"You didn't change. You just grew, Czes. You learned how to see what's good and bad about the world. You should be happy about that. If you still say you changed, then—just change back. Water might freeze, but it'll melt again someday. People can change, too."

Then, scratching his head awkwardly, Elmer smiled.

"If you want to melt again, just let yourself feel the warmth of your environment. Even if you don't lean on the kindness of the people around you, you should probably at least accept it."

"I'm impressed you can say things like that without blushing... What's in it for you if I change?"

"I already told you: Smiling like a kid suits you better. It isn't just you. Most of the people in the world are designed to look good with a smile. Anyway, if it'll make you smile, I'll do anything to help. Oh, but if you could manage it, steer clear of telling me to kill people or die myself."

At those words, Czes stopped, then turned around. His face was expressionless.

"In that case, if I told you to jump down from here, would you do it? You won't die, you know."

"....."

"Don't say you'll 'do anything' so easily—"

Czes didn't finish his sentence.

"Okay, roger that. Hiyaaah!"

“Huh?”

With an incredibly goofy-sounding yell, Elmer’s body left Czes’s field of vision.

Splorch.

Just as Czes understood what had happened, a dull sound echoed up from the ground.

Then—right after that, he heard cries from Maiza and the others.

“Elmer?! Elmer, stay with me!”

“What? What’s he doing falling to his death *here*?!”

“Hmm. Excellent. Let us bind him before he revives.”

With the voices below in his ears, Czes quietly looked up at the starry sky.

Wearing a strange, unreadable expression in the moonlight, the boy murmured:

“I’m sorry, Elmer... Thanks for the thought, but I can’t smile at all...”



CHAPTER 3
JOY ANGER SORROW FUN
Sylvie Lumiere

CHAPTER 3

JOY ANGER SORROW FUN

Sylvie Lumiere

The next day
Christmas Eve

There was a long table in the old castle's great dining hall. The five immortals had assembled in this room, the most spacious one in the castle. There was no food on the table, only five cups filled with water. Although there was nothing to eat, the surroundings were studded with Christmas decorations, and flames flickered beautifully over the candlesticks on the table.

"Meeeeerry Chrissstmas!"

Possibly because he was feeling hyper, he yelled the greeting with an odd accent.

The individual who'd spoken was bound hand and foot and tied to a chair at the head of the table, in the "birthday seat." Maiza and the other three sat around him.

The master of the castle, who'd been captured during the night, had ended up spending the whole night tied up. Even then, no sooner had he opened his eyes than he issued detailed instructions to Maiza's group to change the decorations inside the castle to their Christmas versions.

They really weren't sure why they should have to do something like that, but the girls were already working silently. In the end, perhaps motivated by guilt, the visitors all worked hard to decorate the castle.

"Don't you 'Merry Christmas' us. Honestly," Sylvie muttered, giving a tired half smile. "The moment Czes found you, you panicked and jumped off the roof...? Granted, you won't die, but even recklessness has limits, you know."

"There are no limits to recklessness! Everything that goes beyond its own limits is reckless, and—"

"Let me just say this: I don't intend to listen."

"That's mean!!"

Behind Elmer and the others, whose conversation sounded like a comedy routine, Czes silently stood off by himself. Elmer hadn't mentioned his conversation with Czes to the group; he'd based his story on the premise that he'd fallen off the roof on his own. To Czes, it felt as if someone was covering up his crime for him. It made him desperately uncomfortable, and he'd hesitated, wondering if he should tell Nile and the others the truth. However, in the end, he'd let it go, and the situation had turned into what it was now.

"The truth about why you fell should stay between you and Czes."

Maiza seemed to have guessed that something had happened between the two of them, but he hadn't tried to pry. Come to think of it, neither Sylvie nor Nile had asked him about it, either.

Was it possible that they *all* knew everything and were protecting him?

If so, they should really mind their own business.

However, Czes didn't feel like checking and simply stayed quiet. In the midst of his silence, he thought back over what had happened the previous night. The only thing that came into his mind was the image of his right hand, set on Elmer's head.

Could I trust anyone that much?

The question had surfaced abruptly, and in response, Czes immediately shook his head. If it was Maiza, or his new friends in New York—Isaac and Miria, or even Ennis, who'd lived with him as an older sister—he wouldn't mind having one of their right hands on his head. However, he probably wouldn't be able to be so innocent about it, let alone actively make them put their hands there.

Besides, how was it possible to do something like that with a person you'd just met again for the first time in almost three centuries? Czes had worried about that all night long. You could say it was because Elmer was an idiot and leave it at that, but his bearing wasn't like other people's. For example, Isaac and Miria, the nutty couple in New York: They could probably trust Czes without even thinking about it, smile at him as he put his right hand upon their crowns.

However, this Elmer guy was calculating to the last. He wasn't spontaneous. He tried to make people smile with shrewdness and a resolute goal. Although his calculations were mostly wrong, on the whole, he was completely mystifying to Czes.

What had made Elmer go so far? At the time, he hadn't given even a little thought to the idea of eating him.

As these doubts coiled and circled, Elmer abruptly called out to him.

"Don't look so glum, Czes, my boy. Smiles rule the world right now, you know? Specifically, well, guys who don't smile die. Just look

at the world-subjugating archfiends in cartoons and things. They're smiling like they're enjoying life, right? See, they're not smiling because they conquered the world: They conquered the world because they were smiling. So let's smile before the demons do and send food to aid starving people around the world so that *they* can smile—"

It might be better not to understand after all.

As disgust welled up in Czes, Nile leaned back self-importantly and urged him on to the topic at hand.

"This is no time to be receiving signals from somewhere weird, Elmer. You yourself are the archfiend of this village, are you not? Let me just say this: I will have you keep your promise. Go on. Speak."

"He's right, Elmer. We talked to the girls in the castle yesterday, and they said you'd kidnapped them from the village as 'sacrifices.' They wouldn't tell us any more than that, but...what's going on, exactly? You don't seem to have committed any violence, but...depending on the circumstances, I may treat you rather sternly."

Maiza's usual smile had vanished from his face, but Elmer deflected the man's intense gaze with a smile of his own.

"'Kidnapped' is rude. When I demanded sacrifices from the village, they offered those girls to me."

"It's the same thing."

"No, see, it really isn't..."

With a knowing look, Elmer shook his head, then drew a deep breath and launched into his story.

The story of the time the village had acquired a demon.

"All right, where should I begin...? I know. It started when I got killed here."



Three years ago
December

When Elmer had come to the village, the lone girl had been the only person who met him.

The girl's attitude had been weirdly subservient, and he'd wondered about her, but he'd had her show him around the village for the moment.

The villagers made no attempt to show themselves to him. The doors to every house were shut tight, and they stayed that way. However, their gazes followed him from the shadows, clinging to him like a fog.

“Whoa, not good. Oh crap, oh crap, this is seriously not good. Wild animals gunning for me are glaring at my back. Man oh man, is this what they mean when they say popular guys have it rough? Or are aliens maybe plotting to abduct me...? Can I assume that being popular with aliens is the ultimate global standard, in a way?”

As he was saying things like that, the girl led him to a shed in a corner of the village.

“Whoa, this is all there is? Seriously?”

No one could have called a good environment, not by any means. The shed was so decrepit that it seemed as if just a little more snow on top would send it tumbling down. One of the doors had been taken off, the windows were broken, and it was doubtful whether it would provide any shelter from the cold.

“...Well, it doesn’t look as though anyone in the village is using it. Erm, I’m sorry for being so picky, after you went out of your way to show me. Besides, I’m the one who said anything that kept off the wind and rain was fine... Okay, then I’ll take you up on your kind offer and stay here. Thank you. To show my gratitude, I’ll teach you about Christmas properly tomorrow, so look forward to that.”

On that note, he tried to take his leave of the girl, but for some reason, she followed him in.

“Huh? Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry—I’ll figure things out on my own.”

Elmer smiled at her, but the girl murmured, sounding troubled:

“This is my house...”

“Huh?”

His smile froze, and he scanned the dark interior.

Then, gradually, Elmer’s expression shifted into something serious.

Inside this shack, which didn’t even have a foundation and didn’t seem like a house at all...several girls were gazing at him.

All were grimy, and each of them wore the same blank expression. Their faces looked vaguely similar, like siblings or something of the sort.

As Elmer stood still, unable to process the situation, one of the girls—the one who’d first led him there—spoke apologetically.

“I think we can fit...one more person. If it’s too cramped, I’ll sleep outside...”



“I tell you what: *That* was a shock. If they’d been more my type—y’know, glamorous bombshells with hourglass figures—it would’ve been a legit harem. I would have been over the moon. These kids were only about fifteen, though, so it’s not like I could do anything, right? I mean, apparently that’s a pretty popular situation in Japanese manga these days, but you wouldn’t want that in real life.”

Still tied to the chair, Elmer chattered away about his past. The tale really didn’t sound plausible, but Maiza and the others had seen these similar-looking girls, so they accepted that part and kept listening to the story.

“And then what happened?”

“Well, I thought they were probably sisters who’d lost their folks and were being ostracized or something, and it seemed like it wouldn’t be nice to ask about it, so I kept quiet. Then, the next day, I tried going around the village. In the end, though, none of the villagers showed themselves. I could tell they were watching me from a distance, but when I called to them, they’d run off somewhere. So I figured I wouldn’t stress about it, and I started looking for a place where those kids could live without having to worry so much. And then I heard about this abandoned castle. Apparently the villagers thought it was haunted by a monster, and they steered clear of it, but I didn’t see anything... So I cleaned the place up and made it so we could all live here.”

“I can accept that much. However, why have *you* become the monster?”

In response to Maiza’s question, Elmer’s lips warped cheerfully.

“I just thought, since we were spending Christmas in a snow-covered castle, we needed to spruce it up a bit. I had the girls help me, and we worked hard and put up all kinds of decorations in one night. We didn’t have a single sheet of origami paper to work with, so we just used rocks and twigs from the nearby trees... However, the next day, on Christmas proper, the lot from the village came up to the castle. I thought, *Finally, I made contact, now I can have a Christmas party and get acquainted with the villagers at the same time, woohoo!*, but they were all carrying weapons and told me to get out of the village! I kept the girls behind me and tried to protect them, but against several dozen hoes and sickles, I was at a serious disadvantage. I was in deep trouble, and they had me cornered! ...Well? Are you on the edge of your seats yet?”

“...You’d better not be making this up.”

“Don’t look at me like I’m a resident of Liar Town. No, I’m really not lying... Well, to put it bluntly, they killed me.”

At those words, Sylvie stared back at him blankly.

“Huh...? Why?”

“I complained a bit, and the guy in charge of the village, Dez, just hauled off and decked me. If that had been all, it would have been okay, but—”

As if finishing the sentence for him, Maiza murmured:

“—They saw you regenerate, didn’t they?”

He seemed to have been right on the money. Elmer averted his eyes awkwardly and continued.

“When I came to, they’d driven a stake through my heart. It hurt like hell. I was thinking, *Geez, vampires really have it rough.*”

“I know. Wounds to your heart are no joke.”

Czes muttered as if remembering something and shivered like he was cold.

“Well, once I managed to get the stake out, I regenerated right away, but...I figured I’d just say it was a good thing I was alive and headed to the village to clear up the misunderstanding.”

“Huh?”

“They were incredibly freaked out. It was hilarious. This lady who had a fruit stand on that central road just fainted dead away... Then they surrounded me again, and that time, they tried burning me to death. I was already on fire when I desperately made a break for it. I rolled down this snowy slope, over and over, and finally put the flames out, but then I couldn’t stop rolling, and I ended up buried in snow. In the end, the snow hid me, but still.”

“.....”

“The sun came up again, and bright sunlight shone down on me. When the snow thawed, I woke up, then discovered that my lower body was frozen! It took me a whole day to get back to the castle, but I figured I’d just say it was a good thing I was alive, and the next day, I went back to the village to clear up the misunderstanding.”

“What?”

At that development in Elmer’s story, Sylvie dubiously interjected. However, Elmer let it slide and kept talking.

“The villagers looked even more freaked out. Talk about a laugh riot. The girl who’d been setting out fruit screamed and ran away... Then the villagers surrounded me again, and that time they bound me hand and foot and threw me into the river. Well, I got washed ashore downriver, and I walked back through the woods to the village. I figured I’d just say it was a good thing I was alive, and in an attempt to clear up the misunderstanding—”

At that point, Elmer seemed to notice the mood of the others around him. He coughed, then changed the course of his story.

“At any rate, that sort of thing went on for days.”

“Let me just say this: You idiot.”

“Don’t say it straight out like that, Nile. See, I just thought, if I

greeted them with a smile no matter how many times they killed me, eventually they'd understand that I didn't mean them any harm."

"If it had been me, I would have simply left the village."

Nile's comment seemed perfectly natural, but Elmer gently shook his head.

"I hadn't achieved my goal yet... Well, I'll tell you about that in more detail later. At any rate, I'd planned to stick with this approach for the long haul, but then I noticed that the girl who'd first shown me around had a serious wound on her face. When I asked her, she said the village headman had done it. That burned me up... So I threatened the villagers a little. All I did was show 'em a few of the magic tricks I'd used to swindle people when I was an alchemist, but their attitudes changed drastically after that, and they started treating me like an archfiend."

Sylvie had stayed quiet up until that point, but when she heard that, she spoke softly.

"Yes...there's something odd about the villagers, too. Being that persistent, when you hadn't done them any harm..."

"Nah, I think it's pretty normal. They say Europe during the witch hunts was a whole lot worse. Inquisitors who were after money, inquisitors who framed people as witches to gratify their own sadistic desires—there were lots of those guys around, but people caught up in a mob mentality are scary, too."

Cackling away, Elmer spoke about something that wasn't remotely close to funny.

"You guys don't know the terror of ordinary folks. You're way too unfamiliar with the fear of 'Nameless Villager A.'"

Remembering the treatment he'd received, he continued speaking, still smiling ironically.

"People turn to violence when their desires spur them to it. However, most people can control themselves. Those are, well, 'ordinary folks.' In that case, when is it that ordinary folks are driven more by violent impulses than by desires? What causes it? Terror, that's what."

"Hmm. I can understand that, albeit not completely."

Seeing the masked man nod, Elmer nodded back quietly.

"People use terror as an excuse to exercise their strength, in order to protect themselves. If it happens in the middle of a group that's experiencing the same terror, it's an action everyone condones... Although it's still intolerable for the guy who gets assaulted when he didn't do anything. Ha-ha-ha."

He paused to draw a deep breath, then, changing his tone and bearing, continued his story.

"All right, getting back to the story. I told the villagers, just as a

joke, ‘Give me a sacrifice once a year.’ Those guys, though... They took it seriously, and a girl actually showed up. So, since there was no help for it, I asked for enough food for the girl. Allow me that much, please: The villagers had worked her like a cart horse. I just thought she had the right to it, see.”

“...Food aside, there’s still a problem here. Let’s say your prank doesn’t matter. We do want to know what those girls are—”

When Maiza attempted to ask a more pertinent question, Elmer’s body abruptly began to emit a series of unpleasant creaks and pops.

Their eyes went wide at the sudden noise, and then, out of the blue—

“I did this sort of trick for them, too. Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Along with that laugh, a smoke screen erupted from him.

Elmer toppled over backward with a clatter, plunging himself into the smoke and disappearing. Nile hastily checked the chair, but all he found were untied ropes and a fallen chair rigged up with smoke bombs.

“That sound... Was that—?”

“Yes. Apparently he dislocated his joints. Hunh...formidable fellow.”

As if mocking the four of them, Elmer’s voice echoed from somewhere near the ceiling.

“Hey, relax. Even if you don’t catch me—February! When February comes, you’ll understand everything, I promise...”



December 26, 2001

Morning

The old castle

The sky was endlessly clear, and the cold air stung every inch of skin.

The castle hadn’t seemed that large from the outside, but when it came to decorating the inside, they felt keenly aware that it boasted quite a lot of space. Picking up a New Year’s decoration, Sylvie heaved a sigh over the expanse around her.

“So what on earth is happening in February?”

She’d grown completely accustomed to modern conveniences, and the idea of spending the remaining thirty-five days or so in this castle was very painful to her. Just how many years had it been since she’d been somewhere with no showers, TV, or magazines?

In the first place, this forest had been positively littered with odd things ever since they'd driven into it. The isolated village. The girls who'd appeared on horseback. The castle, with its odd design. Their onetime companion, who reigned there as a demon... And the villagers terrified of Elmer.

Even though they'd celebrated the arrival of the twenty-first century only a year ago, this village was just like a fantasy world from a book or movie.

"Really... It feels as if this village is stranded a hundred years in the past, or even further back," Sylvie murmured to no one in particular, as she gazed at the decoration in her hand.

The ornaments Elmer had prepared had been made quite cleverly; he'd brilliantly re-created decorations that were used in New Year's events in countries around the world. They were putting these up according to instructions from the castle's girls, but the girls seemed to be getting directions from Elmer somehow, so their words were practically his.

However, the girls didn't talk much about themselves. On their first night at the castle, Maiza had told them, "If you'd like, you can return to the village. I'll talk to Elmer for you," but they'd only shaken their heads slightly.

They still didn't even know the girls' names.

Sylvie had thought that if they were going to be living together for more than a month, that wasn't right, and she'd been considering how to get to know them better. She'd meant to establish some sort of connection that day and make friends with them, but the chance just wasn't presenting itself.

An odd sense of loss enveloped her. However, when it was close to noon, her chance abruptly arrived.

"Um...Master Elmer says that if boiled river water will do, we can prepare a bath..."

As Sylvie was gazing at the *kadomatsu*, odd objects like miniature trees decorating the entrance, a voice abruptly addressed her from behind. When she turned around, one of the sacrificed girls was standing in the light that streamed through the window, looking nervous.

"Tell him to tell me things like that in person."

"Y-yes, I'm very sorry..."

"It's nothing you should apologize for. Also, there's no need to stick on *Master* for somebody like Elmer. Or for the rest of us, of course."

Smiling gently, Sylvie went over to the girl and bent down a little to her eye level. Then, tilting her head slightly, she asked the girl a

question.

“My name is Sylvie. Sylvie Lumiere. If you wouldn’t mind, could you tell me your name?”

The words seemed to vaguely bewilder the girl, but possibly because Sylvie’s smile had set her at ease, she timidly began to speak.

“Um...I’m called...Fil...ma’am.”

“I see. Thank you, Fil! You don’t need to be so polite, though. You can just call me Sylvie, too.”

At that point, Sylvie noticed something. She really should have picked up on it at the very beginning, but the odd atmosphere that hung around the entire village had captured her attention.

“Fil... You can speak English?”

“Y-yes. Master Elmer said I might need it later...”

True, when she listened carefully, her pronunciation was often a bit awkward, but it caused no obvious problems in conversation. When she considered it from that angle, it meant that Elmer was teaching her words with a clear goal in mind.

“Don’t tell me he’s planning to spirit you away from this village...?”

However, if the story Elmer had told before had been true, it was very likely that the girls were being subjected to some sort of discrimination here. In that case, taking them away from the village might not necessarily be the wrong decision.

“Well, you’re the ones who should have the final say there.”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, no, I’m just talking to myself. Don’t mind me.”

Sylvie shook her head, then looked at Fil quietly.

When the girl found herself the target of someone else’s gaze, her eyes swam for a short while, as if she was troubled. After a moment’s pause, she said “Excuse me,” and made to leave. However, Sylvie began to walk slowly after her, matching her pace to the girl’s.

“Um...did you need...?”

“Listen, since we’ve got the chance, I thought I’d like to hear more about you. Would you come walk in the courtyard with me?”

At that question, the girl stopped walking and fell silent for a short while. The silence lasted a bit too long for simple hesitation, but after a short while, she slowly raised her head and answered Sylvie, her face expressionless.

“All right. *I’ve just received permission from Master Elmer.*”

Just?

Bewildered, Sylvie didn’t know what the girl meant. However, at the time, she thought she’d probably made some grammatical error since her English wasn’t perfect yet. Sylvie brushed it aside.

She didn’t have the slightest suspicion that those strange words

had revealed the girl's true nature...



A few moments earlier
The village
Headman's residence

"All right then, Father. I'm going."

About the time the sun had begun to shine on the south side of the village, Feldt, the headman's son, spoke solemnly.

"Do whatever the hell you want."

Dez, the village chief, gave him a surly response. All that sat in front of him were dishes that had been there since breakfast, and a cup filled to the brim with water.

There were several people in the house besides the father and son: the influential villagers who'd assembled for the meeting the other day. In a village of this size, *influential* didn't mean they played any particular roles. They simply had more of a say than the other residents did.

In contrast to the headman, the villagers turned worried eyes on Feldt as he headed for the entrance. As the boy set his hand on the doorknob, the man who seemed to be the oldest in the room spoke to him.

"Are you really planning to go?"

"If a large group of us went, we'd just put them on their guard. Besides, if we're only going to reconnoiter, it's more efficient to send small numbers."

"That's still no reason for *you* to go, young Feldt. You're the headman's son..."

"There's no help for it. No one else wants to do this... In any case, if they spot me, I might be able to negotiate with them."

"...True, you seem braver than we would be if we went, but—"

The villagers still seemed uneasy, and Dez spoke to them crossly from his seat at the table farther back in the room.

"Leave him."

"Headman, you don't have to say it like that!"

"Your son is taking your place because you're spineless—"

All the villagers in the room denounced their leader, but Dez was completely unapproachable.

"Then why don't you go?" he spat.

"Gkh..."

“Stop it, Father.”

On that note, Feldt nodded to the villagers, then wordlessly set off under the wintry sky.

As if to follow him, the villagers made for the exit. All of them were muttering—“His son’s a good kid, but...,” “Ever since his wife died, he couldn’t be lazier,” “This when he can’t so much as wash the dishes if his son’s not around,” “It’s too hard on Feldt, poor boy”—and they glared at the master of the house as they went.

“Hunh.”

As if to say he didn’t care, the headman knocked back his glass of water—and, after making sure everyone had left the room, he smiled quietly. He just gazed into space and smiled.

Although he wore a smile, *his expression didn’t betray a hint of emotion*. If there had been anyone to see, the terror of it would have either frozen or repulsed them.

All except for one person: the smile junkie they called a monster.



Morning.

Today will be hard all day.

I already know that.

We have to put away the Christmas decorations, and we also have to start getting ready for the festival to celebrate the new year.

However, this year isn’t like the previous years. There are more people.

The people who came from outside this forest. I’ve learned they were Master Elmer’s old friends.

They’re kind to me. At first, this hurt so much I couldn’t stand it.

Things are a little different now, though. That’s because I’ve decided to think that maybe, just maybe, they’ll stay with me forever.

That feeling will probably come to nothing. Still, at the very least, I can dream until then.

I’m already more than used to painful things. Even if they were to leave this forest, everything would just go back to the way it was. Those first days, changeless days. No dreams or hope, only repeated oblivion, and gradually, I’d stop thinking entirely—

I’m starting to feel bad, so I won’t let myself think on it any further.

I simply make preparations for the “New Year,” or whatever it is, in silence.

We used these *kadomatsu* decorations last year, too. Apparently

they're actually supposed to be made of "bamboo" and "pine trees." Master Elmer once said, "Someday I'll show you the real thing," but... I really don't think he'll be able to.

My oldest memory rises in my mind.

Somewhere that isn't here—probably near the place where I'm always reborn.

In that white room, surrounded by walls and a floor made of a substance that isn't stone or wood, that person speaks, stroking my hair:

"That forest is your glass bottle; it is your flask. You girls can't leave it and live. That is what you are..."

I understand the meaning of those words all too well now.

No matter how we dream, no matter how we hope, in the end, we're all—

"Hello there."

Someone speaks to me, and I turn around.

Outside the shack on the outskirts of the village, Master Feldt is standing in front of me.

"Oh..." I say.

"I'm on my way to the castle."

As he speaks, Master Feldt gazes into my eyes. His face is expressionless.

"What do you think?" he continues. "You and the others. What do that demon's companions—?"

He breaks off in midsentence, looking down. "I'm sorry. It's nothing."

Maybe he sees my confusion. Master Feldt covers his face with his hands, looking troubled. Averting his eyes, he eventually speaks to me again.

"It's all right. I know what I said the day before yesterday, but—I'll make it so you won't have to be sacrificed."

"What...?"

I'm even more perplexed. *What on earth is he saying?*

"Up until now, we've just been under that demon's thumb, but... Before February, when you'll be sacrificed, I'll run the castle's demons out of this forest, I swear it. And then...I've always been too afraid of my father to do anything, but if I chase the demons out, I think I'll be able to be braver, too. So I'll do as much as I can to make sure the villagers don't bully you anymore."

Master Feldt nods vigorously. At that point, I really have no idea

what I should do.

By “demons,” of course he means Master Elmer and the others. If he chases them out...it would immediately shatter the wish I’d had a moment ago. However, what Master Feldt just described would be enough to take its place.

“Later, then.”

With that, Master Feldt leaves.

...What should I do? Is it all right to let the surrounding situation sweep me along, to simply wait for the results? Or should I act, somehow? If I do act, what should I attempt to do?

The bewilderment makes me raise my head. If only, if only—if only Master Feldt had smiled at me even a little just now. If he’d smiled with no guilt, the way Master Elmer did, I might be able to see some sort of hope in this village, and yet...

With my petty excuse, in the end, once again, I choose to let the current carry me along.

The truth is, even I want to smile.

However, right now, I can’t smile from the bottom of my heart. Faking a smile would be like blasphemy toward Master Elmer, and even though I would like to pretend, I can’t.

Once again, I stop thinking—and concentrate on straightening the *kadomatsu* in the castle entryway.



Noon

The old castle

The garden

Sylvie and one of the girls—Fil—were enjoying a walk in the garden under a blue sky. Despite the strong sunlight, the cold was intense, and white breath misted through the air in time with their steps.

Elmer seemed to have cleaned the garden up. It wasn’t at all overgrown, and it was arranged fairly neatly around the path that led from the main gate to the castle’s interior.

As they walked through the garden, Sylvie spoke to Fil about various things. She was trying to learn anything she could about the girl, and about Elmer’s objective, but none of her attempts bore much fruit. Fil didn’t seem to want to say much about herself. No matter what she was asked, the girl looked down with mild distress and said, “I’m sorry, I don’t really know, either.” It seemed more as if she really didn’t know what she was, rather than that she didn’t want to answer.

Just unilaterally asking questions seemed mean, so she tried to guide the conversation to the girl's interests as well, but Fil never spoke to her proactively in the first place.

However, at the end, just once...the girl said something that caught her attention.

It happened when Sylvie mentioned the other girls in the castle.

"Come to think of it, you and the other girls all look a bit alike. Are you sisters?"

At that casual question, Fil's expression grew more unsettled than it had been at any point so far. Then, after brooding for a little while as if choosing her words, she tilted her head and spoke quietly.

"Um...I don't understand it very well myself, but...*I'm the only one in this castle.*"

"Huh?"

What could she mean? It seemed odd, and Sylvie was about to ask—but was forced to suspend her question because, out of the corner of her eye, she had spotted a small figure crawling in a corner of the garden.

However, she didn't turn that way immediately. Directing an unchanged smile at the girl, she murmured, "Listen, Fil. The wind's picked up. Shall we go in?"

"Yes."

The girl didn't seem to have noticed the newcomer, and she agreed to Sylvie's suggestion without question.

Then, without a look back at the garden, the two of them disappeared into the castle.

Only the figure remained, alone in the cold wind.



"Hmm. To think this place would house the entrance to a subterranean tunnel."

"It seems to be a secret passage. I didn't think the castle would have something like this."

Nile and Maiza had been thoroughly exploring the castle and discovered a stairway leading down from the castle's apparent library. Although they'd called it a library, it was only a cramped room lined with bookshelves. Nearly all the volumes had crumbled to dust. For that reason, it had been easy for them to discover the mechanism that moved the bookshelf.

"Want to go down?"

"Wait a minute. Before that, let's check through the books in

here.”

Restraining the impatient Nile, Maiza picked up the few references that remained. Those books had been badly weathered, too, but after they scanned the places where they could make out the letters—Maiza and Nile looked at each other.

“...I recognize these documents.”

“Let me just say this: Me too.”

The book they’d picked up was, by coincidence...well, apparently it hadn’t been a coincidence at all. Going from the titles on the covers of the other books that were lying around, Maiza made a confident declaration.

“Most of these books...have to do with alchemy, don’t they? And particularly with—”

Behind his mask, Nile’s eyes narrowed at the conclusion Maiza had drawn.



Did they notice me?

Palms sweaty, Feldt hid in the shadow of a shrub, holding his breath.

The gate had been carelessly left open, and he’d managed to sneak into the garden without being spotted. However, immediately afterward, one of the girls who’d been offered as a sacrifice and a woman—one of the outsiders who’d arrived in the village the other day—had come out into the garden together.

For a little while, he’d watched them from behind a tree beside one of the gateposts, but they were discussing something, and they were getting closer to him as they talked. Deciding that they’d see him if he stayed there, when the pair looked the other way, Feldt took the opportunity to move to the shadows of the trees in the corner of the garden.

However, when he checked on them again, the pair was standing right where they’d been before. They spoke to each other briefly, then turned and went back into the castle.

Had they seen him there and gone to call their companions?

Nervously, Feldt stopped moving, determining to keep an eye on things from here for a while.

“Still...this place is even gaudier than it was last year...,” he murmured, observing the castle’s exterior from the shadows of the trees.

Curious ornaments were displayed in every window, and the

overall design scheme was based on the contrast between red and white. The colors clashed badly with the stone castle, and the incongruity made the building seem especially absurd. However, the ludicrous sight would probably sink deep into the villagers' minds as something horrible.

At the entrance were two strange objects fashioned from trees that grew in the woods. Sticks that had been trimmed to have angled tips stood perpendicular to the ground, with bundled pine needles tied around their bases. Depending on how one looked at them, they could be weapons or traps, or some sort of sorcerous idols, and a peculiar unease hung over Feldt's heart.

Just as Feldt gulped, and the tension inside him reached its limit

—
“Excuse me.”

A voice spoke behind him, and cold electricity ran down the boy's back.

The sweat on his palms dried up in an instant. Not only was he incapable of turning around, he was struck by the sense that even his breathing had jumped free of the current of time. His consciousness reeled so violently it felt about to explode, but his body wouldn't follow it. His heart had been disturbed too abruptly, and its connection to his physical nerves seemed to have been broken.

Behind the completely immobile Feldt, someone addressed him kindly, as if to release him from his paralysis. The clear voice belonged to a woman, and it warmly embraced his back.

“It's cold there, isn't it? Why don't you come in and have some tea with me?”

At the sound, Feldt finally regained his composure. Slowly, starting with his head, he turned around.

He was met by the sight of an inhumanly beautiful woman—the one who'd just left the garden and gone inside a moment before—and her soft, untroubled smile.



In the castle's drawing room.

Bright flames glowed in the fireplace, dimly illuminating Feldt's bewildered face.

Sylvie and Czes sat across from his chair, on the opposite side of the table. They'd wanted to call Nile and Maiza, too, but they hadn't been able to find them anywhere. They'd considered looking a bit

longer, but in the end, thinking that being surrounded by the four of them would only scare the kid, Sylvie and Czes had decided to talk to him by themselves.

“Let’s see, where should I start? I’m Sylvie, and this boy is Czes. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Uh, um...I’m Feldt Nibiru.”

Even though he was flustered by this completely unexpected development, Feldt gave his name honestly. In the worst case, he’d thought the negotiations might not go well and he’d be taken prisoner. He’d never imagined he’d be welcomed so cordially and asked into the drawing room.

“Did you come to watch us?”

The boy beside Sylvie turned an ironic smile on Feldt. He’d nailed it. With no way to argue, Feldt looked down and said nothing.

“Czes, hey. Don’t say it like that! After he took us up on our invitation and everything...”

“But—”

“Honestly. Don’t glower at me. You’ll ruin your sweet little face.”

“.....!”

Sylvie laughed merrily. Czes blushed scarlet and fell silent. That said, since they’d been speaking English, Feldt had no idea what was going on.

“I’m sorry. Don’t worry about it, all right? Oh, and the only one of us who doesn’t understand your language is Nile—the one in the mask—so it’s okay to relax and just talk.”

That was what Sylvie said, but Feldt didn’t know where to begin. He couldn’t abruptly say, “Get out of the village,” and the atmosphere wasn’t the sort that would let him begin negotiating about the sacrifices, either. In any case, if Elmer—the most important demon—wasn’t here, it wouldn’t do any good.

After he’d thought as much, something abruptly occurred to Feldt. Were these two also monsters, like Elmer?

That doubt gradually deepened, and he took the initiative in the conversation for the first time.

“Um...the man named Elmer... How are the two of you related to him?”

It was a rather roundabout question, but Sylvie immediately understood what Feldt was driving at. Smiling a bit mischievously, she began, quite matter-of-factly, to tell him the truth.

“This little guy and I, and the other two, are basically the same as Elmer. Immortal bodies that will heal up right away, no matter how badly they’re hurt—do you know what I’m talking about?”

She’d struck the heart of the matter so easily that Feldt couldn’t decide how to react right away. It was the conclusion he’d feared

most, and yet the woman had spoken so serenely that he couldn't think of it as a serious problem.

"Immortal... You really are...demons...then?"

Holding back the excitement that was gradually building inside him, Feldt timidly asked the rest of the question. In response, Sylvie answered him as readily as before.

"We're not demons, and we aren't devils either. We're proper humans...although we did have help from someone we call a demon. Let's see... Since we've made friends with you, maybe I'll tell you about it."

"Wait, is it okay to tell him that?"

Startled, Czes tried to stop her, but Sylvie nodded, smiling.

"Sure, it's fine. Telling him won't do any harm, and whether he believes it is up to him. Oh, but if you believe in demons, this story will be easy to believe, too."

On hearing that, Feldt spoke as if something had just occurred to him.

"That's right... The demon in this castle—the one that was here before Elmer came. What happened to it?"

Wide-eyed, he'd asked the question quite clearly. Sylvie and Czes exchanged a mystified glance.

"What demon?"

"Huh? Um...don't you know? It's been living in this castle for over ten years now."

"Elmer didn't say anything about a demon... I haven't seen anything that looks like one, either."

"....."

For a little while, Feldt gazed into Sylvie's eyes, but before long, he drew a breath, seeming somehow relieved.

"Is that right...? Then I guess it really was just a rumor..."

Murmuring the second half of the sentence as if to himself, Feldt looked down, apparently relieved.

"That must have sounded strange. I'm sorry. Um...could I ask you a question, too? What are you...?"

As he changed the subject, Feldt's voice was clear. From his tone, it was obvious that the fear and unease he'd felt mere moments ago had faded significantly. This seemed to relieve Sylvie slightly, too. Smiling gently, she began to speak to the young villager.

"Let's see, where should I start? It's already been more than three hundred years since it happened, you see..."

As Sylvie related the events of the past, images rose in the minds of the two boys in the room. Feldt, who'd never seen the outside world, wasn't able to see those sights clearly, but nostalgic pictures, complete with sound, played back in Czes's mind.

The scene was very beautiful, and sad, and it spread out forever and ever...



“Let me just say this: I can’t see a thing.”

“You don’t need permission to say that. I’m turning on a light now...”

Having gone down the library staircase, Nile and Maiza were underground, and naturally there was no light there. Holding a flashlight he’d brought in from the car to help them explore the castle, Maiza gradually illuminated the depths of the passage.

The narrow corridor ran in a straight line from the entrance. About ten yards in, the stone walls cut out, and the passage became even narrower, with walls made of something like packed earth.

Exchanging nods, the two men slowly set off into the depths of the tunnel.

As they walked through cold, cloying air, the pair organized what they knew about the village.

“Good lord, what is this forest, anyway? An isolated village, a strange castle, sacrificial girls, and those books... You are certain this is private land?”

“Yes. Officially, it’s owned by one of this country’s wealthy citizens, but...as I mentioned to Czes and Sylvie earlier, he doesn’t seem to be conducting any particular business.”

“A rich, spoiled young pup burning through his inheritance, hmm? With all this property, I expect they will be able to live stably for three generations yet... Although no doubt that fourth generation will be miserable.”

While Nile matter-of-factly predicted strangers’ lives, Maiza was reviewing what he’d seen of the village and puzzling it over in earnest.

“Still... This is true of Elmer’s ornaments as well, but there were some things in the village that clearly couldn’t have been made here.”

“Hmm. What do you mean?”

“Besides... The village headman told me I ‘wasn’t one of the traders’ companions.’ If you think about it, it’s possible that they get minimal oil and everyday commodities from these traders... But assuming the traders really exist, where on earth do they come from?”

“I see... That certainly is odd.”

Maiza’s concern hadn’t been limited to that point, and he kept

sending more questions Nile's way.

"In the first place, it's strange, isn't it? Both this castle and that village... Given the scale of the village, crude observations aside, it should be possible for satellites that perform detailed analyses to capture it clearly...and besides, they take all sorts of aerial photos these days. Some public agency somewhere must know exactly how this private land is being used."

"Hmm. Is that how it goes?"

"Yes, particularly since it's strange for an individual to own territory this vast in the first place. I'd think the public eye would be quite strict."

They'd reached the beginning of the dirt walls, and the two tall men stooped slightly and went on. It seemed to be wet red clay, and the humidity it gave off was so great that moisture could have started dripping from the ceiling at any moment. However, the two of them weren't worried about getting their clothes dirty, and they were absorbed in their conversation.

"In other words, someone's exerting pressure from that angle?"

"I can imagine someone would want to. This is the twenty-first century, and that village is cut off from the outside world. No matter what the circumstances are, attacks from human rights groups and the media would probably have terrifying effort behind them."

"Three hundred years ago, this sort of thing was fairly common, but..."

"That hasn't changed. The conditions are different, that's all. Strange stories are always generated and suppressed to suit their eras."

"I see. True. By the way, Maiza, can you use the Internet?"

"I don't use it much. Or rather, for the past thirty years, I've never stayed in one place for long. Besides—this is rather embarrassing, but I'm a bit intimidated by an environment in which the information and experience we spent three centuries accumulating can travel around the world in a single day... Although, when I called them a little while ago, I learned that several of the men in my syndicate are quite addicted to it."

"Of our group, Huey is sure to have mastered it."

"When we leave this village, I expect Elmer will be overjoyed to buy a computer as well."

While they talked about pointless things, the pair reached the end of the passage.

At some point, the walls had changed from earth to stone again, and in the wall on the left at the very back, several stones protruded like a ladder. When they turned the light on the ceiling, they saw a square hole with a cover made of some sort of rock.

“Apparently we’re supposed to climb up.”

“Allow me to venture a wager: It will be a graveyard. Everyone knows these things usually lead to graveyards.”

“In that case, I say it’s beside the well that was around the back of the castle.”

After cheerfully announcing their predictions, Nile went up the vertical rock ladder and carefully lifted the stone cover. Dust showered down like rain, and Maiza involuntarily put up both hands to shield himself below.

At the same time, the stone cover began to open, and dim light filtered between his fingers.

Nile stuck the top half of his head up to peer through the crack under the stone, examining his surroundings for a short while...but before long, he pushed the stone up all the way and spoke, satisfied, in the sunlight.

“Let me just say this: I win.”

It was in fact a graveyard, surrounded by thick woods. In the distance, through the gaps in the dense trees, they could see the back of the castle. It hadn’t felt as if they’d walked a significant distance, but they’d come farther from the castle than they’d anticipated.

“I guess I lose.”

Murmuring regretfully, Maiza took a look around at the scenery he’d emerged into.

It was a small graveyard, and he didn’t see any road that led to it or any fence around its perimeter. Five or six gravestones were hidden among the trees, and if they’d been walking through the area in the ordinary way, they would probably never have seen them.

Most of the tombstones had no inscriptions; however, the one right in front of the stone Nile had pushed up had been engraved with an odd passage. It was written in an antiquated version of the country’s language, as though the villagers’ speech had been converted into text.

Below sleeps one who could not become fully human.

Compared to the condition of the gravestone, the inscribed epitaph didn’t seem to have eroded all that badly. It had probably been engraved at some point in the last few decades, at the very earliest.

Maiza was curious about the meaning of that inscription, but Nile—who couldn’t read it—seemed to have been bothered by something else for a while now. Neatly settling the stone lid he’d lifted back into place, he checked on something with Maiza.

“Let me ask you, Maiza: *Did you notice it, too?*”

For a moment, the question bewildered the man, but Maiza soon

grasped its meaning and nodded.

“Then...that really wasn’t my imagination?”

“Mm...”

The whole time they were walking through the underground passage, they’d felt uneasy.

The passage had been completely straight and empty. Aside from stone and earth, there had been nothing there, but—

They’d felt *the presence of something besides themselves*.

Not a mole or bat or anything like that, but not quite human, either. They had no idea what it might look like physically, but from the feel of the air around them, they’d instinctively sensed that something was there.

It had felt as if a ponderous gaze was pressing down on them from all sides. Precisely because they’d sensed it, the two of them had taken care not to let their conversation trail off until they’d passed through the corridor.

“Let me just say this: Back then, I am positive that there was something near us.”

“...The demon, you mean?”

“Not possible.”

“Well, it was probably our imagination.”

“Hmm. Let us say that it was.”

For a short while, the two of them looked at each other. Before long, though, they smiled as if to laugh at themselves, then began to push their way through the trees back toward the castle.

...Sensing some unsettling presence under the closed stone cover all the while.



“Then...you became an alchemist just for that, Miss Sylvie?”

“No, that wasn’t it.”

In the drawing room at the old castle, Sylvie and the others were still chatting. At first, Feldt had listened attentively but timidly. However, as the conversation progressed, he’d gradually grown absorbed in the “past” she spoke of... Or, more accurately, in the entire outside world she told him about. Words he didn’t understand popped up here and there, and when he realized they were all things that were “outside,” an intense curiosity welled up from deep inside himself.

It wasn’t clear whether Sylvie had registered what the boy was feeling. She just kept smiling at him with the same alluring eyes.

“I grew interested in the fairy tale of eternal beauty through a children’s story I read as a little girl. As a rule, the people who try for that sort of thing are witches or wicked queens. But, you see, I had a thought: Wouldn’t it be all right if at least one person in the whole world made a fairy tale like that come true?”

When she’d spoken that far, the emotions in Sylvie’s eyes changed slightly. The only one who noticed the trace of sadness in them was Czes, who knew her past.

“When I told the boy I loved about this, he said, ‘People are more than just looks.’ He also told me I was cute enough just as I was, and that once we were both immortal, he wanted to get married and stay together forever and ever. But, you know, for that very reason...I wanted to become the most beautiful girl in the world, and then marry him. I wanted him to be able to boast that his family was the most beautiful anywhere. It’s silly, isn’t it? And so—back then, I didn’t drink the liquor of immortality.”

At that point, Sylvie looked up into space, as though recalling a fond memory.

Feldt seemed to sense something in her behavior. He murmured a question, as if it was hard for him to ask.

“Um...that person... Where is...?”

“You saw the man with glasses, didn’t you? His name is Maiza.”

On hearing that, the boy was relieved: Her wish had come true, and they were living together even now, safe and sound. However—she hadn’t finished speaking.

“It was his little brother. I told you about that Szilard person earlier, remember? They say he was the one that man ate first.”

“Oh.....”

Sylvie’s smile was faintly melancholy, and Feldt couldn’t think of anything to say to her.

Maybe Sylvie noticed this. She immediately recovered her captivating smile and spoke to Feldt, fluttering her hands.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t worry about it. Yes, let’s talk about something else.”

At Sylvie’s words, Feldt hesitated for a little while, then slowly responded.

“It may be strange to ask about something like this, but...”

Averting his eyes as if he was a little embarrassed, Feldt put his wish into words. His tone held none of his earlier fear of Sylvie and the others. It simply brimmed over with curiosity.

“Please tell me—about the outside. What sort of place is it? I want to know...so much more.”



From the shadow of the door, I listen to Mistress Sylvie and Master Feldt's conversation.

I know it's wrong, but I'm terribly curious.

And once again, I think, *Just maybe...*

At first, Master Feldt seemed wary of Mistress Sylvie and the others, but now he looks as if he is truly enjoying himself. Master Feldt has always hated Master Elmer and me less than the other villagers did, but from the way his voice sounds now, he seems to have no loathing at all for Mistress Sylvie and the rest.

I imagine a certain outcome. How many decades has it been since I did something so pointless? I've visualized futures I hoped for before now, only to be betrayed, over and over.

Still, this time... This time, I feel as if it will come true.

Until yesterday, every time I tried to imagine a future, the pain had gotten in the way.

Master Dez's violence had made me remember direct pain.

However, things are different now. I don't know why, but... Even though he is Master Dez's son, when I think of Master Feldt's face, I can get by without remembering the pain from his father.

If Master Feldt persuaded the villagers, and the villagers stopped being afraid of Master Elmer, and no one had to be hurt anymore, and

—

And if the village were linked to the outside world—

How wonderful that would be.

I can't leave this village. Still, if more people like Master Elmer come in from the outside, and the village develops further and further, that would be enough for me.

I was born in a glass bottle, and I can only live within the flask of this forest.

Even so, I wish. I wish that happiness—even just a little—would visit me and the village.

Because the village is the only place where I can live...

I am still able to wish for happiness.

I remember. I just remembered, quite clearly. *This feeling is joy.*

Is there anything I can do to keep this emotion from disappearing?

Because I am certain. I know that if this happiness becomes a reality...

...then I will be able to smile like Master Elmer.



At the same time
Village headman's residence

The five girls with very similar faces lived in the village.

What were they, and where on earth had they sprung from? There wasn't a single villager who really knew.

They had existed for as long as the current villagers could remember, blending into the village as if their presence were perfectly natural. The village's older members had seemed to know something, but they'd all passed away without saying anything about it.

The number of girls was always the same, and there were no indications that they aged. Once every few years, one of the girls would begin to grow noticeably weaker, and several days later, she would be replaced by a new one.

They were like something out of an occult movie, but they didn't frighten the villagers much.

The girls were clearly beings unlike themselves, but the villagers had grown up around them and were used to them. They told themselves that the girls were what they were and gave it no more thought.

In other words, the mysterious children were treated the same way as the outside world.

It wasn't as though the villagers would get clear answers if they asked the girls. In the past, several people had attempted to see the moment the girls were switched out, but, like those who'd tried to go "outside," they'd never returned.

This sort of thing happened again and again, and gradually the villagers began to shun the girls.

The current village headman, Dez Nibiru, had accelerated this.

Dez thoroughly exploited them, swore at them, and was sometimes violent toward them. However, they didn't put up the least resistance, and as long as they were given the bare minimum of food, they'd do even the worst jobs without a word of complaint.

Little by little, the villagers' attitudes toward them had been influenced by Dez, and now almost no one gave any thought to their personalities or wills.

Not even to the fact that all the girls used the same name...

Dez Nibiru: the man behind the abuse of the girls at the villagers' hands.

While his son was hearing tales of the outside world from Sylvie, the man was in his own house, slumped back in a wooden chair.

This was the biggest house in the village, and it was a little too

large for a man whose wife had passed away.

“Hunh.”

The whiskered man was just staring into space. There was no one else in the room.

Then, in that empty room, he muttered at the ceiling:

“—It’s time to say good-bye, then. To this village...to me...”

Plastering on a smile devoid of emotion, Dez fell silent.

When he looked out the window, clouds had begun to appear here and there in the formerly blue sky.

“And to *them*...”

Snow would begin falling soon. Certain of it, Dez just kept smiling quietly.

That blank smile had appeared with the silence—and then gradually vanished into it.



Evening

Outside the castle gate

“Um, thank you...very much for today.”

When Feldt thanked her, flustered, Sylvie smiled back at him softly.

“My pleasure. If you get the chance, you’re welcome to come again.”

“Yes, ma’am! Only, the snow always gets bad around this time of year, so...I don’t know when I’ll be able to.”

Feldt still seemed reluctant to go, but he probably couldn’t just stay at the castle. He thanked Sylvie over and over, and at the end, as he prepared to leave, he added:

“I’ll tell the villagers about you. I don’t understand why this Elmer fellow asked for sacrifices, but I know you and the others are very good people!”

“I don’t think you should tell them that in so many words.”

Czes, who’d been looking on quietly up until then, stopped Feldt as he was about to turn away from the castle.

“The villagers were abnormally suspicious. If you defend us too easily, they may think you’ve been possessed by a demon. Just tell them, ‘They may be plotting something, but at any rate, they didn’t harm me.’”

At those words, Feldt looked blank, but after giving it a little thought, he nodded vigorously.

“You’re right. Still, I’ll do the best I can to tell them the truth... Okay, then. Really, thank you so much!”

Feldt said his good-byes once again, and this time he did leave, heading toward his village.

“My, my. It’s unusual for you to say things like that, Czes.”

“Shut up. It doesn’t matter.”

If this turns into a witch hunt because of us, it’ll leave a bad aftertaste.

That was all Czes had thought, but it was also true that his impression of Feldt hadn’t been a bad one. Thinking that he really did have a soft spot for children, he remembered that something similar had happened in the past.

As he thought of the little girl he’d met on a certain train seventy years ago, his memories of the incident that had occurred on that train vividly returned. The terrors that had been branded into his eyes in that sealed space made Czes shiver involuntarily. This village was a closed-off space as well. An indescribable unease welled up inside the immortal who looked like a boy, but, thinking he was worrying too much, he decided to just let it go.

That’s right. This village doesn’t have a monster like the Rail Tracer.

Privately scolding himself for his cowardice, Czes silently went back into the castle.



“Dum-dum-dum-da-da, doo-doo-da-da-doo-doo-dum... There!”

Humming an odd little tune to himself, a man was decorating the castle roof.

He abruptly stopped humming, glanced at the hand-wound watch he wore on his wrist, and called out.

“Say, what’s everybody else doing?”

As he asked the question, Elmer was merrily unrolling a hand-dyed, red-and-white-striped curtain. The girl beside him answered indifferently.

“Yes, Master Elmer... They’re all in the drawing room, talking about searching for you.”

“Ah-ha-ha! I see, is that right? Then I guess it’s okay to stay here a while longer.”

With that, Elmer began working and humming again.

Several minutes later, having finished hanging the curtain, Elmer spoke to the girl beside him again.

“Are they still in the drawing room?”

“.....Yes.”

Even though the location was distant and the girl hadn't moved a step for a while, she gave a clear report of the situation.

“I see. In that case, I guess I'll take the opportunity to move. I'll watch for chances on the night of the thirty-first and hang the red-and-white curtains then.”

In high spirits, Elmer stretched, then headed for the stairs to the lower floors.

The moment he walked into the tower with the staircase—

“Dum-dum-daaah-dum-da, dum-da-da-da-dum...da, da, da-daaah?”

His cheerful melody abruptly shifted into astonishment.

The instant he'd stepped through the doorless entry into the interior, Maiza and Nile had leaped from the shadows, trapping both his arms before he knew what was happening.

“H-huh? You're kidding! You're supposed to be in the drawing room...” From his expression, Elmer didn't seem to comprehend the situation, but before long, he yelped in surprise, “D-don't tell me one of you guys has the ability to stop time?!”

“What sort of nonsense is that?”

“Then how...? Wait, no...”

Gasping in realization, Elmer twisted to look behind him, even though both his arms were pinned.

“Fil.”

The girl who'd been with Elmer for a while now closely resembled Fil and even shared her name. The moment her eyes met Elmer's, she flinched.

“I-I'm terribly sorry, Master Elmer!”

“Heavens, you've done nothing to apologize for.”

On the heels of that transparent voice, Sylvie and Czes appeared from downstairs.

“Sylvie...I can't believe you! Teaching people to lie...!”

“Don't say things that could be misconstrued. I merely taught her there are some lies that it's okay to tell, and some that aren't... And then I had her practice on you.”

Another Fil was watching Elmer apologetically from behind Sylvie. On seeing her, Elmer sighed, sounding resigned.

“I see. So you caught on. I didn't think the truth would come out this quickly.”

Then, smiling rather sadly, he briefly stated the bottom line:

“The fact that all the Fils are the same person.”

"She's a homunculus. That's it, isn't it?"

Having relocated to the castle's dining hall, Maiza and the others sat Elmer down in a chair again. He'd promised he wouldn't run anymore, so they hadn't bound him with ropes this time.

"Bingo." Elmer answered Maiza with startling ease. "What tipped you off?"

"There were all sorts of factors. However, we gathered a short while ago and compared notes, and that was the conclusion we came to."

At that, Maiza looked at the opposite side of the dining hall. The four girls who lived in the castle were all there. All four wore the same worried expression, and they were watching the other group quietly.

"Sylvie noticed that they share the same mind. She asked the village children about them, then noticed some of the girls' inconsistencies. In addition, Czes says he watched them for a little while, and...although they were always giving us messages from you, they didn't seem to be contacting you at all. Not only that, but instead of hiding in any one place, you were constantly doing work around the castle. How did you manage to stay hidden from us without the benefit of security cameras? You were using the girls instead."

"Wow, that's incredible. You sound just like a great detective."

"Stop joking around, please."

With a solemn countenance, Maiza admonished Elmer, then began to speak about what he himself had seen.

"In the castle's library, we found alchemical research texts. Not only that, but they were a ramshackle mixture of works ranging from orthodox to heretical, and all of them dealt with the creation of homunculi. However, I couldn't imagine you were the one who'd collected them. After all, if we believe what you've said, they were already here when you arrived in this village."

"....."

"This time, we insist that you tell us. Not only about the true identity of the girls, but about the village's secret."

In response to Maiza's earnest speech, Elmer replied, finally looking serious.

"I'll tell you about that in February."

"Elmer."

"No, I mean...in February, somebody's coming who can tell you a lot more about the heart of the matter than I could."

"Who?"

Sylvie prompted him, curious about who would come to this isolated area.

"The trader."

At that word, Maiza's group exchanged glances. Their expressions were odd: half-surprised and half as if they'd expected this. The sight seemed to satisfy Elmer. He grinned and asked Maiza about something that had been bothering him.

"I'm impressed you kept your cool like that, Maiza. True, they're not like the authentic sort, but genetic engineering is popular now, and you still thought 'created homunculi' first."

In response, Maiza smiled like a mischievous child.

"Yes, I have a very similar friend in New York."

At Maiza's words, Czes gave a small, wry smile, and Elmer fell silent, as if he'd just realized something. Nile and Sylvie had no idea what this was about, so they just watched Maiza, mystified.

Outside the window, small snowflakes had begun falling thickly.

The white flakes drifted down in silence, as though putting a lid on this forest-encircled land.



CHAPTER 4
JOY **ANGER** SORROW FUN
Nile

CHAPTER 4

JOY ANGER SORROW FUN

Nile

After that came a series of uneventful days.

Absolutely nothing happened.

Master Maiza and the others didn't question Master Elmer any further. Instead, they spent their time observing the ecology of the surrounding woods, exploring the castle, and throwing themselves into preparations for the daily "festivals."

Since coming to this forest, Master Elmer has taught me about all sorts of different festivals. He told me about a variety of events throughout the year, and we actually held pretend versions in the castle.

Apparently, "outside" is divided into lots of big communities called "countries," and each country and region has a wide range of unique festivals.

Even in this season, when the snow is beginning to drift high, Master Elmer buzzes around as if he is having gobs of fun.

He dressed up as an ogre called Krampus and frightened the villagers, and the winter after that, he dressed up as another ogre called a *namahage* and did the same thing. In autumn, he said we were having a festival called Halloween, and he had me dress up in strange clothes, too. For some reason, Master Elmer gave me candy just for wandering around in those outfits. I thought it was a mystifying event. Master Elmer also dressed in an odd costume and went to the village and had fun scaring the people there again. This sort of thing kept happening, and the villagers grew even more frightened of him.

When a day called "summer solstice" drew near, he took tree branches with the leaves still on them and used them to make a large structure. He said this was a custom from the country just outside this forest, and that it was a festival held in hopes that the sun would shine forever. However...I wonder if Master Elmer knows that when the villagers saw that object, which we set up on the day when the sun climbed the highest, they clamored that it was a demonic ritual.

After we ate chicken eggs laid by the castle garden's inhabitants,

he carefully kept the shells, then painted them bright colors and used them to decorate in spring. Apparently this was a festival to glorify someone's resurrection, and to be accurate, we should have stopped eating meat dishes about a week before and painted the eggs red. However, after Master Elmer explained those customs, he said, "Well, we aren't believers, so there's no need to be straitlaced about it. Let's just do as the Japanese do: enjoy the bare outlines of other countries' festivals," and kept on smiling. Then he busily decorated the castle with colorful eggs and ornaments...but apparently the villagers spotted the egg objects from a distance and imagined that it was another eerie ritual. Even I heard voices shouting that we were sacrificing chicks and laying some sort of curse on them. However, I didn't have the courage to deny it. All I could do was look down.

The one we celebrate every year, without fail, is Christmas. I was told that, really, a person named Santa Claus was supposed to come in a bid to deliver happiness to everyone in the world. When I asked if that meant everyone in the world was happy, Master Elmer laughed and said, "You know he couldn't hand all that out in a single night." That seemed logical to me. However, after that, Master Elmer said, "... So I'll do it instead." Every year, he said things like that and gave me some sort of present.

There were all sorts of things: ornaments made of paper, or food Master Elmer had made himself, or handcrafted toys fashioned out of wood he'd worked. When I accepted them, instead of happiness, I was filled with feelings of guilt. Why did Master Elmer do all this for me? When I asked him, his answer was quite simple:

"That's easy. Because, in this village, you're the one who smiles the least."

Hearing that made me feel even worse. Even though I knew that was no good, I couldn't smile from the bottom of my heart. When I tried to force at least an imitation of a smile, Master Elmer shook his head and told me, "It's not good to force it. If you keep faking smiles, when you really want to smile, your smile will come out warped."

In the midst of all this, Christmas is here again this year, and Master Elmer seems even busier than usual. While he hides from the other people, he laughs and runs this way and that, putting up decorations all over the castle and snapping party crackers at dinner.

I don't know what I should do. As if he's hit on an idea, Master Elmer chuckles and speaks to me.

"Those four are your present this year."

I'm perplexed. I don't know what he means. Master Elmer stops laughing, then smiles kindly and says...

"Make friends with them, all right? They may be able to make you really smile."

And so the days pass without incident. I'm as incapable of smiling as ever. Still, there is something different about me now. Even I can feel it. Once, when those four had arrived, I'd almost been trapped by hatred, but that gradually faded, too. I've begun to see hope.

This season is "New Year's," apparently, and I was told that everyone celebrates the beginning of a new cycle together. Last year, saying that it was a custom in some eastern country, Master Elmer purchased a great quantity of something called "firecrackers" from the trader and sent roars echoing through the woods. Naturally, it deepened the rift between him and the villagers. Master Elmer seemed to understand this well, but he beamed the way he always did, and he actually looked as if he was enjoying the situation.

Today, he says, we're having a festival where we stew seven types of herbs and then eat them: another Asian custom. In preparation for it, Master Elmer and Mistress Sylvie are boiling water in the castle. Master Nile does nothing but sleep. When he does wake up every so often, he goes to the castle stable and plays around with the three horses, while Master Czes spends his days constantly reading the books that were left in the library. Master Maiza often comes to me and asks me about various things, but sadly, I don't know much about myself. All I can do is tell him about the things that remain at the root of my memories, in bits and pieces, but he listens to each word intently. He always thanks me for my awkward stories.

I want to be more useful to them, but I can remember hardly anything about my past. All I remember are my days of abuse at the hands of the villagers. Those are the only sort of memories I have, and even they are being blotted out by the present.

My memories of each day since Master Elmer came, and since Master Maiza and the others came, are overwriting them.

Ah, that's right. This must be what having fun feels like.

I try to smile, but the atmosphere in the village troubles me.

At this time of year, the villagers have very few opportunities to go outside.

I don't know what they're thinking after Master Feldt's visit to the castle. They'd never tell me, and even if they are plotting something, there isn't much they can do in all this snow.

February.

When February comes.

When the season Master Elmer called "February" comes...

...a trader from outside the forest will visit.

When the snowy season's trader has gone again, they'll offer up a sacrifice.

It will be me again this year. When that happens, for the first time

in five years, I will be all in one place.

Abruptly, I think of something.

Of course: I'll smile then. Brightly, like Master Elmer and Mistress Sylvie. If I smile suddenly, surely Master Elmer will be surprised. After that, he's bound to smile at me.

What should I do? I'll have to start practicing my smile now.

Stealthily, secretly, so that Master Elmer doesn't see.

And so time passes again...



February

The old castle

The month changed, and one day, after a stretch of fair weather, the trader came.

The thing that appeared in this village, which was greatly divorced from the outside world's level of civilization, was enough to remind them that this was the twenty-first century, not the past.

"That's..."

When the sun had almost reached its zenith, a roar suddenly echoed through the area, startling Maiza and the others and sending them scrambling for the castle's main gate.

There, they saw an enormous motorized snow sledge that was roughly shaped like a truck.

"What's going on?"

The huge truck had stopped in front of the castle, and the first thing Czes and Sylvie did was try to get a look at the driver's seat. However, the window glass had been specially treated, and, like the cars politicians rode in, the side windows were black and merely reflected the light.

When they circled around to the front, they were able to dimly make out the truck's interior... But when they saw the person inside, Czes and the others were struck by a terribly eerie feeling.

Whatever was in there did seem to be human, but a black mask covered its whole face, and what looked to be a military helmet covered that. It had something like goggles over its eyes, so it wasn't possible to see what they were like—but its face was turned their way, and it seemed to be watching them.

"Heh! Did that startle you? Or are you homesick for the outside world now?"

As Maiza and the others were examining the truck, they heard the same old teasing voice behind them.

“He’s the trader... Though, that said, he never gets out of the truck.”

Ignoring Maiza and the others, who weren’t sure what to ask first, Elmer called out loudly to the man in the driver’s seat. Spreading his hands and indicating his companions behind him, he said:

“You understand the situation, right? Take us back with you.”

“Huh...?”

Before Czes could ask what he meant, the engine roared, drowning out his voice. Rear wheels kicking up a ferocious spray of snow, the truck sped away down the snow-covered mountain road. The road through the forest was only slightly wider than the truck itself, and if another vehicle came from the opposite direction, there wouldn’t be room for them to pass each other. That said, in all likelihood, the driver was doing this because he was absolutely certain that there would be no oncoming vehicles.

“All right, he should be back in an hour or so.”

With that, Elmer went back into the castle, leaving his four dumbfounded companions behind. After that, all that remained were Maiza and the others with question marks floating over their heads—and, as proof that this had not been a dream, deep tracks in the snow.



The trader has come to the village.

The villagers all gather around the cart, exchanging crops harvested in the village and handiwork they’ve made during the winter for oil, cloth, and various other materials. However, no one gets out of the driver’s seat, and everyone performs the trades themselves, based on the rates posted in the back of the cart.

There might have been some people who took articles for free and ran off with them, but the trader always stays in the cab of the iron cart.

Miss Sylvie told me that technically, it’s called an “automobile,” not a “cart.” Apparently, it works just like the vehicle Master Maiza and the others arrived in, but this one is much weightier and bursting with strength.

In any case, I don’t dislike watching the bartering. Since I’m observing from a distance, no one sends me contemptuous looks, and all their faces are filled with energy.

That said, until now, I really only “didn’t dislike” it. At this point,

I think I can actually say that I like it.

Of course, deep down, the villagers seem unsettled by the trader. The trader comes from “outside,” too, and he is unmistakably evidence of the existence of something they want to deny. However, unlike outsiders, the trader doesn’t interfere with the village. He’s been around since the villagers were born, and the adults stick to a policy of ignoring him, so the children naturally imitate them.

The same thing probably should have happened to me. However, ever since Master Dez became headman, that custom has collapsed. For some reason, Master Dez can’t stand the sight of me and makes no attempt to hide that fact, and, as if to follow his lead, the villagers also—

I should stop. Because that period has gone on for so long, my memories have been buried in chaos. It feels as though if I recall those days too vividly, the shining light ahead of me will sink into deep darkness.

It’s gradual, but little by little, I can tell that that light is growing brighter.

Maybe it’s because of Master Elmer, Mistress Sylvie and the others, and Master Feldt. They may be why I managed to see light again from the depths of the darkness.

I once thought that although Master Feldt didn’t despise me, he didn’t help me either, but let me correct that. Master Feldt saved me. He spoke to me without contempt. He treated me as me. That was already salvation enough, wasn’t it? Strictly speaking, I might be wrong, but at the very least, that’s what I’ve decided to believe.

Maybe it’s because the hope that lies ahead of me is drawing nearer.

It might be my imagination, but the sky seems higher and bluer than usual.

As I watch the villagers, someone calls to me from behind. The voice belongs to Master Elmer.

While I keep my eyes on the trading, I look at Master Elmer’s face. He’s wearing his usual smile.

“Fil. When the trader goes home today, Maiza and I are going to have him give us a ride outside...to the place where you were born, actually.”

“Huh?”

“If you feel like it...I’d like to tell you the truth about yourself. It may be a shock, or it may clear up your doubts and make you feel better. For that reason, it’s completely your call.”

I have no reason to refuse.

To be honest, I do feel a little uneasy. I think that in learning

everything about myself, I might destroy the life I've led up till now. I think this forest, my flask, might break.

But now...now, I feel as though I could accept it all.

Besides, if I'm going to really smile from the bottom of my heart... Surely this is a trial I have to get through first. Somehow, I know I have to do this.

"I'll go."

I respond in the clearest voice I've ever used.

"I would also like to know...what I am."

Just as the me in the castle says this, the me in the village spots Master Dez.

He's beside the truck, standing in the midst of the commotion, and he's staring at me.

Have I done something without realizing it again?

Remembering the pain of being hit, I shrink back involuntarily, but...

Without saying a word, Master Dez walks away.

It stirs up a strange uneasiness inside me.

Master Dez's behavior stays with me as an intense concern, but I want to focus on what Master Elmer is saying right now, so I push it down into the depths of my heart.

If my memories are correct, for the first time since he became headman, Master Dez looked at me...and smiled.

However, the smile was nothing like Master Elmer's. It had seemed completely empty.

A smile whose temperature was incredibly low. A smile cold enough to freeze someone.



Afternoon

The forest road

"It's been quite some time since I was jostled in the back of a truck."

"Makes you feel like a calf on its way to the market, doesn't it?"

Riding in the rear of the truck-shaped snow sledge—in other words, with the cargo—Maiza, Elmer, and Fil (just one of them) bounced and jounced along. The sledge plowed powerfully through the snow, and every vibration resonated inside them like a deep bass sound.

Up until a moment ago, Fil's eyes had been wide open with

something akin to excitement, but she must have gotten tired. She'd fallen asleep, using as a pillow one of the sacks of wheat the villagers had given the trader.

"By the way, Maiza."

"What is it?"

Elmer had spoken abruptly, and he sounded rather formal, so, although Maiza had been stretched hugely and been on the verge of falling asleep, he woke himself up again.

"Why is Nile wearing a mask?"

".....You're asking that *now*?"

"No, well, I mean...! Things were all muddled the first day, and then I just never got the chance to ask! Asking after the fact felt, y'know...wrong. Besides, he didn't explain it himself, so he might have been hiding it from himself, too. If me getting a reputation for insensitivity is all that would happen, fine, but Nile seems like he'd actually get mad."

"True. Once Nile gets angry, he's completely unmanageable."

Remembering the masked man's intensity, Maiza agreed, smiling wryly. "His mask is—well, he says it's insurance."

"Insurance?"

"He says that if we put our right hands on his head, and he's wearing something on it, he might be all right. In other words, if there's some sort of obstacle between palm and head, he may be able to keep from being devoured."

"Oh, I see... Hunh. He's quite a worrywart, too, then."

How about that. That's not what Czes said.

As Elmer was thinking this, Maiza smiled a little and added:

"No, it isn't that Nile doesn't trust us. According to him—"

"Say you and I were camping. Half-awake, in the middle of a dream, you grab a tasty-looking melon. Then, in your dream, you think, *I want to eat this!* Now, what if your 'melon' was my head? I would be sent to the next world in my sleep. Let me just say this: I do not think getting eaten by one of you is the worst thing that could happen to me, but I will not tolerate dying over something like that. That is all."

"Ha-ha, there, see? He *is* a worrywart!"

Elmer cackled. Still smiling quietly, Maiza murmured:

"Well, that's what he says, but...I think it may actually be something else."

"Yeah?"

"Nile says he's spent the past three hundred years on battlefields all over the world. The whole time, he stuck to areas where the

fighting was considered particularly fierce, and he kept himself on the front lines.”

“.....”

“I don’t know what he was trying to learn by going exclusively to places like that, or what he saw there, but... It’s possible he wears that mask because he has something else on his mind...although that’s just a guess.”

As he spoke about his old friend, Maiza looked as if he’d become aware of something. Elmer watched his face for a while. Then, suddenly, he smiled with relief.

“Maiza. You must’ve met some real good people.”

“That was abrupt. Why?”

“No, it’s just...your smile. It’s more cheerful than it was three hundred years back.”

Elmer had brought up something odd out of the blue, and as Maiza responded, he smiled wryly.

“Does it look that way?”

“Yeah. If Czes learns to open up a bit more, I bet he’ll be able to smile like that, too,” Elmer said, remembering the boy’s sad expression during their conversation on the castle roof.

“Hmm? What about Czes?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

At that point, the conversation nearly trailed off, but Elmer had one more thing to say.

“By the way, how’s the demon doing? He’s one of your pals, right?”

“

At the name of his old companion, Elmer gazed up into space, looking faintly nostalgic. “Ah, I see, yeah. Even if it isn’t alchemy, I bet he’s running some kind of experiment.”

“He’s the type who attempts to see whether the power of immortality could be used to overthrow the government, after all,” Maiza offered.

“Ah, I miss him. I haven’t seen him in forever. Denkurou, too, and Begg, and Victor.”

Seeing Elmer’s vaguely sad smile, Maiza also recalled his old companions’ faces.

“You could simply go see them, you know. Leave this village.”

“Yeah, I’ll go. In order to do it, though, I’ll need your help, Maiza.”

“Ah? What do you—? Oh.”

Before Maiza could ask, the truck abruptly began to decelerate.

Some sort of metallic creaking came to them from the front of the slow-moving vehicle. From the back of the truck, they couldn’t tell what was happening, but it seemed likely that some sort of gate was opening.

A few seconds later, the truck gradually began to pick up speed, and their surroundings were abruptly enveloped in darkness.

“...Is it a tunnel?”

“We’re almost there.”

The tunnel ended almost immediately, and light poured down around the bed of the truck. However, Maiza had been paying attention to the things he could see from the back, and the scenery was far more desolate than he’d anticipated.

Before he had time to observe anything in detail, the truck suddenly slowed again, then came to a stop.

“Did you think we’d be in the city all of a sudden? In that case, you win the booby prize.”

They’d arrived at what appeared to be a laboratory of some sort.

Ignoring Elmer, who was cackling, Maiza poked his head out of the bed of the truck and looked around. They were in a large warehouse, and it appeared as if the structure had been built over the tunnel to hide it. It seemed like the sort of dock used to build warships, only scaled down and hauled up onto dry land. Several figures were visible inside the building; they were dressed like security personnel, with guns in the holsters at their hips, and they were obviously the polar opposite of the people they’d seen in the forest.

When Maiza saw the concrete floor and the security guards, his senses were immediately yanked into another dimension. Up until ten minutes ago, his brain had been calibrated to the feeling of wandering

a fantasy world in the forest, and now it found itself abruptly confronted with the reality of twenty-first-century Earth. Realizing he was feeling mild culture shock over civilization that he should have been used to, Maiza smiled to himself a bit awkwardly.

One of the guards seemed to have noticed Maiza. He started toward them, one hand on his holster. From the fact that he hadn't signaled to any of his companions, he didn't seem to be specially trained military personnel.

"Well, now. What's going to become of us?"

Maiza asked the question calmly, as if he was more than used to this sort of situation.

"It's fine, no worries. He won't shoot us on sight."

Elmer was still sitting down in the bed of the truck, stroking the sleeping Fil's head and smiling.

"...So keep your knife where it is for now."

"Understood."

Maiza's hand left his hip, and he waited for the security guard to make his move. However, a few seconds later, they heard a door open at the front of the vehicle. The guard's eyes cut to the door momentarily—and then, as if nothing had happened, he turned his back on them.

As if it had taken the place of the retreating security guard, they heard a dark, solemn voice that seemed filled with condensed fatigue.

"So you're Elmer's companion, then?"

When Maiza glanced in the direction of the voice, an old man with a large build was standing there. He held a pair of goggles and a mask, which he had likely just removed, and it was clear that this was the individual who'd been driving.

The old man looked into the bed of the truck and saw Elmer—who'd raised a hand and was smiling—and the girl who slept beside him. At the sight of Fil's face, relaxed in sleep, the old man exhaled heavily. He wore a complicated expression.

Then he turned to Maiza and introduced himself, but...

When Maiza heard the old man's name, the temperature of his expression cooled rapidly.

"I am Bilt Quates. I'm responsible for this forest. That said, I go by a different name in the official family register."



Sensing the increasing noise around me, the me who'd accompanied Master Elmer wakes up.

It wasn't the time when I usually slept, but, either because I'd worn myself out with excitement or because the swaying bed of the truck had rocked me, I'd been fast asleep.

I'm still in the bed of the truck, and the view out the back is familiar.

I have clear memories here. This is where I always came to die.

Master Quates is standing in front of Master Maiza. How many years has it been since I last saw him? The person who kills me, then brings me back to life. He never told me anything more, and for my part, I never felt like asking him. However, with the mood I'm in now, I might be able to talk to him about all sorts of things.

I'm feeling very good today, and most important of all, Master Elmer and Master Maiza are with me.

Still...

Why does Master Maiza look so stern?

I've never seen him that way before.

At the idea that something bad might be about to happen, a slight unease begins churning in my heart.

Now I think I understand why Master Elmer is so particular about smiles.

When Master Maiza looks like that, it makes me nervous, too.

Please smile, Master Maiza. Please smile...



"So yeah, to put it bluntly, that man is a descendant of old Szilard... Although I hear he never met him."

As they walked through the storehouse, Elmer delivered a matter-of-fact explanation.

"Their faces look similar, don't they? I tell ya, the first time I snuck into the truck and came here, it made me jump. Well, I was plenty startled when the guards surrounded me and beat me up, too, but anyways."

"....."

Ordinarily, Maiza would have met Elmer's banter with a forced smile, but now he didn't even seem to hear it. He just gravely followed the old man.

However, Elmer wasn't the least bit deterred, and he kept blabbing away with a tongue that was even more loquacious than it had been a moment ago.

"C'mon, Maiza, don't look so scary. This old guy...well, 'old guy,' sure, but we're older than he is. Anyway, he's got nothing to do with

Szilard anymore. He's a commendable fellow who's devoted his life to carrying out his parents' wishes, even though it's not work he personally wanted to do."

"Work?"

Maiza's voice surged with a severity he would normally never have shown.

"...You mean isolating people who know nothing in the middle of the woods?"

"Calm down. You're scaring Fil."

When Maiza came back to himself with a jolt and widened his field of vision, he saw Fil, following them as if she were hiding behind Elmer, wearing a vaguely frightened expression.

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. If you're going to say you're sorry, just smile for her the way you always do. That'll make Fil feel better, too."

Elmer grinned and thumped the girl on the back, and the sight seemed to help Maiza regain his composure. He gave a somewhat awkward, slightly troubled smile.

As if responding to it, the old man who'd introduced himself as Bilt began to speak.

"Where should I start...?"

Bilt Quates. He was a descendant of Szilard Quates, the man who'd once gained immortality along with Maiza and eaten many of their companions onboard the ship.

Bilt's grandfather had been one of Szilard's descendants and his capable assistant.

Not content with an immortal body, Szilard had begun working to create a homunculus in order to fulfill his own thirst for knowledge.

It was said that perfect homunculi were miniature people raised in flasks, and that in exchange for having all the knowledge in the universe, they were unable to live outside these flasks.

Realizing that some of the knowledge he'd eaten contained information regarding homunculi, Szilard had intensified his research, seeking perfect knowledge.

However, even if he did have eternity, it would have been too inefficient for him to continue his research alone. To that end, he'd had his own descendant and other competent assistants pursue a variety of research.

That said, he never let another alchemist research his own immortality. He'd used chemists with no knowledge of alchemy to compound his liquor as well, not even allowing his own scion to take part in the work.

Bilt's grandfather had worked under this untrusting man, and one

day, based on a theory Szilard had given him, he had succeeded in creating a type of homunculus. He had used Szilard's immortal cells as a catalyst, and the homunculus was immortal as well...but it had sorely lacked the all-important "perfect knowledge."

"After that, they made and got rid of several similar specimens, and apparently, in the end, old Szilard made a female homunculus called Ennis or Eris or something. I say 'in the end' because...shortly after that, he dropped out of touch completely.

"My grandfather had originally conducted his research in America, but he took that opportunity to return to this country, where the Quates family resided. Then, using Szilard's connections and the property the Quates family still had—well, that would be this land. At any rate, my grandfather made use of those, moved to this region, and continued his research independently.

"Then, for the sake of a certain plan, he threw away all his assets and started development work in the forest. That plan was an experiment regarding homunculi."

Their research had been conducted in order to discover two things: a perfect homunculus and immortality.

To that end, they'd created two varieties of homunculus. Both had been created using a solution known as "the failure" as a base.

It had been a flawed immortality elixir: It granted an imperfect immortality, one that could not stop aging.

This had held a hint regarding the homunculi they made. The elixir brought about immortality by fusing the cells with something in another dimension: To borrow the vocabulary of magic, the immortality resulted from being "possessed" by some sort of colony that regenerated infinitely. Szilard had understood this and had directed his research accordingly. Another world—there was no telling whether it was a multiverse or some completely different element. Because a being known as a "demon" was apparently involved, someone had floated the wild theory that it was a demon realm.

However...simply understanding this hadn't helped them make any progress in the homunculus research, and once Szilard was gone, their work had reached a total impasse. Even so, as they continued the research on their own, they'd come to a realization. That "someplace else" that acted as the foundation for immortal bodies... Would it be possible to make the minds of sentient beings in that place possess multiple bodies on this side?

They'd pursued that line of research, and as a result, they had created two types of imperfect homunculi.

One type was male, and it grew just as humans did. The other was

female and did not grow, but it had a short life span. At the end of their research, they'd managed to keep it from getting older than a certain age, but only in terms of appearance. In exchange, its life was drastically shortened...and in order to compensate for that flaw, they constantly kept five bodies "live."

"In other words, that's Fil."

In very sophisticated tones, Elmer stated that fact as if he were giving the answer to a quiz question.

Arriving at a certain door, Bilt began to punch a code number into the electronic keypad beside it. As they waited, Elmer continued his explanation, calmly adding his own theories as he went.

"When one body 'aged'—or, well, there was no change in its appearance, but anyway—when its health *failed* and it seemed close to death, Fil was supposed to return to this laboratory. They'd estimated the rough times for that on this end of things as well."

As if to confirm this, Maiza looked at Fil, but she only gave a small nod. She didn't seem to feel any particular emotion about it.

Patting her head lightly, Elmer went on.

"Have you ever played video games? If you compare it to that, it's like working two controllers by yourself, playing two roles on your own. Then, if one character dies, you keep playing with the other character, and while you're doing that, you hit Continue. For example: You know how subway entrances are scattered all over the place aboveground, but underground, they're all connected? In this case, the aboveground entrances are these kids' bodies, and underground—in other words, in that other world—their minds are all connected."

Just as Elmer finished speaking, the door in front of the four of them opened with a motorized *whirr*.

What they saw inside was...

"...I thought things like this only existed in movies or comic books."

Maiza was looking at a row of enormous tanks, each of which could easily hold a human being. Most were empty, but several were filled with an aqueous solution, and he realized that each of these had a mass of some sort floating inside it.

"This is..."

They were shaped like human children. Their bodies were curled up, and they looked like fetuses in the womb. The fleshy tube that stretched from each one's bellybutton ran down to the bottom of the tank, where it disappeared into something that resembled reddish-brown mud.

Maiza examined the body carefully—and although he'd half expected it, his face clouded slightly.

The face of the girl floating in the tank bore a strong resemblance to Fil's.

"They aren't clones, see, so they don't have the same faces. Even so, due to the environment and the human cells used as a catalyst, they end up looking as similar as sisters. Anyway, when a body dies, it's put through a special treatment process inside this tank and turns into a clump of flesh like the one at the bottom. I'd really rather not use the word with regard to people, but it's what you'd call *recycling*."

When Elmer had explained that much, Bilt produced a small glass bottle.

"This is the 'water' that serves as a catalyst to link their wills."

The bottle held a clear liquid. As far as appearances went, it was almost impossible to tell it apart from tap water.

"...It looks like plain water to me."

"The stuff that made our bodies like this looked like plain liquor, didn't it? Even if it was the failed version, it was the basis for creating this, so it's only natural, no?"

"You do have a point."

After Elmer and Maiza's exchange had ended, Bilt went on with his tale.



“When ‘empty’ bodies absorb this water, they are possessed... Even if we only give them a single drop. In other words, the girls’ memories and experiences accumulate in this. In that sense, it might be safe to say that this water is their true form.”

“True form? Then you mean this water has a will, too?”

In response to Maiza’s question, Elmer spoke up from the side. He seemed to be itching to say something; his eyes were even livelier than usual:

“No, the water doesn’t have a will. It doesn’t have a brain to think with, or nerves to feel with, or flesh or lips or ears or eyes. To use another game analogy, the water’s more like save data. Once it pours information into the bodies—the ‘characters’—they start to move. It makes them able to feel things, and to think. If it has a human brain, it gains the same capacity for thought as humans have.”

As he thought about what that meant, Maiza fell silent. When Elmer saw this, he regarded the older man, seeing right through him.

“From our perspective, it’s probably a really smart being. After all, it can use five human brains at once, or maybe even more. I wonder what would happen if it was released from our restrictions and showed up as whatever it actually looks like over *there*. Would it think in a completely different way from what we’re used to? ...Or maybe it’s not actually sentient at all, and it’s just operating on some survival program like your average insect. Maybe it learns human words and speaks simply in order to survive. That was a possibility, too, but...”

When he’d said as much, Elmer patted Fil—who’d been listening silently behind him—on the shoulder. She didn’t appear to have followed the conversation completely and seemed perplexed about a few things. She’d probably had trouble understanding once he’d started in with the game analogies. Of course, since she had absolutely no knowledge of video games, expecting her to understand from what she’d heard would have been unreasonable.

Elmer smiled warmly at her, then turned back to Maiza and continued, “But I don’t think it’s like that—or, honestly, I don’t think it matters either way. No matter what sort of being she was over there, she’s herself. She’s a little clumsy about life, but at heart, she’s kind, and she’s always thinking about other people. Right, Maiza?”

In response to that question, Maiza also looked into Fil’s eyes and smiled.

“Agreed.”

For a little while, Maiza examined the tanks. Then he spoke to Bilt, his expression intent.

“All right... Why did you show this to me? What do you want me

to do?"

It was Elmer who answered the question.

"It's simple: Mr. Bilt doesn't have a whole lot longer to live. Well, I mean, from our perspective. Anyway, once he dies, this experiment will be over. There's nobody to pass it on to, and he wants to end it, anyway. In that case, although there'll be lots of confusion, he can just let the villagers go and that'll be that, but... Before he does it, at the very least, he says he wants to save Fil."

Picking up where Elmer had left off, Bilt began to tell his side of the story, a bit guiltily.

"I was always uneasy about the fact that my father and grandfather had thrown themselves into this terrible research with no hesitation whatsoever... No, I'm not saying Fil is terrible. I hear they made two groups of homunculi in the pursuit of 'perfect knowledge.' If they had them live forever, changing bodies as they went, they thought they'd accumulate experience and knowledge, and that in the end, they might be very close to homunculi in the true sense of the word. Based on that idea, they attempted to create a real homunculus. And so, to that end, my grandfather and father began a terrible experiment, backed by their abundant property and the connections our ancestor—Szilard—had made within the government."

Almost as if he was frightened of his own sins, Bilt began trembling violently.

"In exchange for sizable debts and similar things, they 'bought' a large number of people. Many of them had children who had just been born! Then they forced them to become 'residents' of this isolated space. In some cases, they seem to have used other methods, more direct than money... However, I wasn't there. When this village was created, I was still a very young child."

Maiza simply accepted the old man's long confession in silence. However, when he saw that the man had stopped talking for a moment, he asked a question in a grave, quiet voice.

"...Why did they go to the trouble of establishing that village?"

"It's a simulation."

Elmer fielded that question frankly, although Maiza's face was dark.

"They probably didn't want to toss the homunculi they'd created out into the world just like that. First, I bet they wanted to let them acquire a certain amount of knowledge in a 'miniature garden' that they had complete control over, and to study their growth processes when they interacted with people."

"Just for that? They wouldn't have needed to make an entire village... Couldn't they have managed without resorting to human trafficking?"

“They were probably nervous. They wanted to keep it all to themselves. Yeah, if the ‘liquor of immortality’ hadn’t been involved, I bet things would have turned out differently, but, well, apparently everyone who gets involved with immortality goes a little crazy. Long story short: Mr. Bilt’s dad and granddad didn’t want any information about the liquor of immortality to get out. In other words, they weren’t planning to let a single person who was involved in this research leave.”

Ignoring Elmer’s masochistic smile, Bilt resumed his monologue, looking even more downcast.

“I always thought I needed to put an end to this, but...I was afraid; I couldn’t do it! When I think that I’ll have to atone for this horrible sin by myself, now that both my father and grandfather are dead... But until five years ago, when Elmer stowed away in my truck and came here—until he told me what the village was like—I never dreamed Fil was being treated that way! When she came here at the end of her lives, I didn’t notice any sign of that sort of thing... If I’d asked, she might have told me, but I didn’t even do that. Out of guilt over what I was doing, I intentionally avoided the child. It may do no good for me to say something like this at this late date, but at least, at the very least, I want this girl to be happy... If nothing else, I wanted to atone for that.”

Originally, they’d used a laboratory designed to look like a castle as their base. However, when they’d decided to build the village and observe Fil’s growth, they’d cut this area off from its surroundings. They’d injected the trees around it with the failed immortality liquor, creating a forest that would wither only from old age, never from any other cause.

After the village had been established, the alchemists observed the villagers as “traders.” From time to time, unexpected outsiders wandered into the forest, but the villagers seemed to be getting rid of them on their own.

Every once in a while, young people had stowed away in the truck, but they’d all been startled and awed by the outside world, and they hadn’t tried to return to the village. They’d been the sort who’d yearned for an “outside,” even though they hadn’t known whether it really existed. For them and the others who’d made it through the forest on foot and reached the world beyond, its fascination had probably been greater than their attachment to their families and birthplace.

That said, even if someone occasionally did try to return, the researchers had never let them back into the forest.

After listening to the old man's confession, Maiza spoke quietly. His face was expressionless.

"If you mean to make amends, I think you should extend the sentiment to the villagers, too."

"I'm well aware of that. However... Once freed, the villagers will have places to go and the family bonds they've created. Fil has nowhere except this village. Particularly since her life is so short."

"But I went and promised, see. I told Fil I'd show her the whole wide world. I said I'd strike off her shackles and set her free."

Picking up where Bilt had left off, Elmer spoke to Maiza, averting his eyes. He was speaking in a roundabout way, but Maiza immediately understood what he was after and asked him a question in return:

"In other words...you want me to extend Fil's lives?"

"You're so quick on the uptake, Maiza! That's a huge help."

"...Just for the record, I'm not making the elixir of immortality."

"I know that, too. Even so, your knowledge could help the research along, right? Besides...we've got five alchemists here who've lived more than three hundred years each. I mean, I can't force you, but if we all work on this together, I think we'll probably find a way."

Beside Maiza, who'd fallen silent, Fil went over to Bilt and began talking to him.

"Um...I don't understand why you feel you've sinned, Master Bilt. I don't know about the villagers, but I'm fine. Don't look so sad. Please smile..."

Seeing her concern for Bilt, Maiza brooded for a while, a complicated expression on his face. Then, finally, he heaved a ponderous sigh and nodded.

"Show me your research materials, if you would."

Several hours after Maiza had begun perusing the research materials, Elmer muttered:

"I came here because...well, I knew the people who ran this place had ties to Szilard. I'd heard a rumor that there was an alchemical facility in an old castle in the woods. I thought Szilard might come back here, y'know? If he had, I might have been able to talk the old guy around."

"Elmer... You're still saying that?"

"Well, if he's dead, there's no help for it."

As he watched Elmer chuckle, Maiza was struck by a thought.

"Elmer. The information that you were here... You leaked it yourself, didn't you?"

"Oh, you figured it out? Yeah, well, I thought I'd get ahold of

Victor from here and see if he could put me in touch with you. He said he'd talk to the information broker about it, so I just took him up on it. Since it was you, I assumed you'd show up by yourself, but then there were four of you..."

"You were genuinely startled, weren't you?"

"When Fil told me a 'family of four' had come to the village, I had no idea it was you. Thanks to that, I wasn't able to give you a decent welcome, and I looked like a total idiot."

Remembering when Maiza's group had arrived at the castle, Elmer snickered to himself.

For his part, Maiza had put together a certain hypothesis from the facts he'd just learned, and he asked Elmer about it.

"...Were you trying to use my knowledge to complete this research?"

"That's about the size of it."

Elmer admitted the fact easily, without a shred of apparent guilt.

"If it came down to it, I thought I'd have you summon the demon again or something."

"You say that like it's easy..."

Maiza covered his face as if he was appalled, but even then, he was smiling. It looked like he'd resigned himself, somehow.

"Have you given up alchemy, then?"

The casual question made Elmer go quiet for a little while. He gazed into space for a few moments, then spoke with some nostalgia.

"I got into alchemy for the gold. I just wanted money."

"That's unexpected."

"I figured I'd become an alchemist and make mountains of gold, then give it all away to the poor. Of course I was going to keep some back for myself, too. I thought if I did that, I'd be able to make everybody happy."

Elmer looked a bit self-conscious, even embarrassed.

"Dumb, right? It was a fundamentally bad move, in terms of both economics and sociology, and I didn't give the slightest consideration to the fact that the value of gold would drop or production would stop. Well, I've lived a long time; somewhere in there, I learned about those things, and I realized human happiness wasn't that simple... So now I don't have any particular attachment to alchemy."

When he'd gotten that far, Fil and Bilt came into the room. Seeing them, Elmer raised his voice, changing the subject.

"By the way, Bilt, I've been wondering for a while now. What's the male homunculus up to? I asked Fil, but she said she's never met him."

For a brief moment, the old man seemed startled by the question. Then, as if something made sense to him now, he nodded.

“I see... He’s completely blended in with the village, so you’ve probably met him and didn’t realize it.”

His expression growing complicated, Bilt remembered a certain man—or rather, a certain homunculus.

“He probably realized he was being used as a guinea pig, and it upset him. He gave up the experiment of his own accord, before I came to my own resolution. I think it was about fifteen years ago...He infiltrated this place, destroyed the cultivation fluid his body was in, and left. He took the ‘water,’ his catalyst, with him, and he hasn’t been back since. That said, even if he had come, without the water, we couldn’t have done anything.”

Almost as if he was reminiscing about his son, the old man took a single photograph from his coat.

“If I recall, he’s on his second body now, and he should be around fifty years old... I expect he intends to live out his natural life as a villager.”

With the expression of a man hoping for the happiness of his own child, Bilt showed the photograph to Maiza.

“See? This is him. If you happen to see him, please greet him for me.”

The photograph Bilt held out to him was of a lean young man, with sharp, distinctive eyes.

“Let’s see. It does feel as if I’ve seen him somewhere before...”

As if his curiosity had been piqued, Maiza scrutinized the man in the photo.

“Huh...? If you do this—”

As if he’d realized something, Elmer rubbed a nearby eraser lightly on the desktop, then put the eraser shavings over the mouth of the man in the picture.

Fil peeked in at it from behind them, then shrieked a name in spite of herself.

“—Master Dez!”



It can’t be.

It’s not possible... But there’s no mistake.

The old photograph Master Bilt showed us.

Its subject is, without a doubt, Master Dez.

If Master Dez is a created human, like me—did he know about me? If he knows we were born in the same place, why does he hate me so much?

Or... Does he hate me *because* we're the same?

While I stand there, frozen, staring at the photograph, I've also begun to run for the village headman's house.

The night is growing late. The snow in the village is still deep, and there aren't many people out and about.

When they see me running, everyone I pass looks suspicious. They might use this as an excuse to hit me later. Even so, I have to make sure.

If, unlike me, there is only one of him and he's continued to grow...then it wouldn't have been at all odd for him to marry, or have a child, or become the village headman.

"Nn? ...What's wrong? You look tense."

In the castle stable, Master Nile speaks to me for once.

"Are you all right? You look pale... Go ahead and rest; I'll finish up here."

In the castle kitchen, Mistress Sylvie smiles at me kindly.

"Maiza and the others sure are late. What do things look like over there?"

Master Czes is standing outside the castle, waiting for Master Maiza to return.

However, I don't have the wherewithal to answer any of them properly.

For now, I want to keep all my attention focused on the self that is running through the village.

The snow trips me up in places, but I keep making for the village headman's house.

The moment I reach the house, I begin pounding on the door. I don't think I've ever done anything with this much force before. Fierce pain runs through my fists, but now isn't the time to worry about it.

It feels like an eternity before the door opens.

Then, when it does open—

"Huh? Fil... What is it? Why are you so upset?"

The person who appears from beyond the door is not Master Dez, but Master Feldt.

"U-um! Master Dez! Where is Master Dez?!"

"Father went to draw water from the well—"

"Thank you!"

Master Feldt looks perplexed, but I don't have the time to explain.

The cold smile Master Dez showed me that afternoon... That unease has become an enormous anxiety raging in me.

Run, run, run—I'm not sure if I'm running from the anxiety rampaging inside me, or if I'm chasing down the cause behind it...

"Hey, Fil. Don't even think about grilling the village chief over this."

I hear Master Elmer's voice. The me that's with him murmurs, "No, sir" in a small voice... But as far as the me in the village is concerned, it's too late.



There was a small well on the edge of the village. It had been dug deep, and it almost never froze over completely; the ice on its surface could be broken easily by dropping the bucket onto it. The village was far from the river, and so the well was an important reservoir, something at the very center of the villagers' lives.

A lone man was standing in front of it. The man with an arrogant-looking mustache stood before the well, quietly gazing down at the water.

He didn't move a single step. It was as if he was waiting for someone.

And then... The "someone" he was waiting for appeared.

"Master Dez."

At the sound of a girl's voice, the village headman turned. The girl stood there, out of breath.

"I was waiting for you. You took longer than I thought you would."

The headman gazed at Fil's face as if he'd grown restless with impatience. Then he muttered:

"So you know, huh? Finally. Or should I say you remembered?"

He grinned. In his right hand, he held a small bottle.

"You went to the outside with the trader, didn't you? To that place: our cradle, and our grave."

"...That bottle..."

"Right. It's the glass bottle where you and I got our start. The only difference between us is which of those two bottles we were born from. That's all it is."

Speaking with some self-contempt, Dez held the bottle up for Fil to see.

"In other words, this is 'me.' Didn't you hear from old man Bilt?

It's my true form, the catalyst to make more of me. My soul."

Fil had absolutely no idea what Dez was trying to do. As if he'd realized this, Dez slowly began to twist the bottle's cap. He was wearing that cold smile.

"For example."

As if explaining a science experiment, he lectured Fil in a decidedly exaggerated way.

"When this water, my 'will,' is injected into an empty body, 'I' am the result... Now, what do you think will happen if I pour this water into the well and make villagers that are already living drink it?"

"...!"

Up until now, only empty bodies created in the cultivation liquid had been given the will-infused water. If ordinary humans drank it... What would happen to them?

"I tested it once before, on my father-in-law—in other words, the previous village headman—when he was dying of old age. The answer is 'a struggle.' Both wills fight for control of the body. Interesting, isn't it? In other words, a brain that exists in this world as solid matter fights head-on with our minds, which are from another dimension. That isn't alchemy anymore; it's the realm of mediums and magic. Don't you think so? A mind that has taken control is able to take all the other's knowledge and experience for itself. Doesn't that sound a lot like the system the immortals up at the castle have, the system of devouring each other?"

Why did Dez know that? It struck Fil as odd, but after a little thought, she realized that Sylvie had told Feldt all about it. It wouldn't have been at all strange for Dez, his father, to have heard.

"And, I hate to break it to you, but I can't imagine I'll lose to the lot in this village, the sort of people who just get swept along by the world around them... Although I suppose it is a gamble."

When she heard that, Fil finally realized what the man was about to do.

"No..."

"I'm sick of being shut up in this *wretched* little village. It might have been better if I'd just kept living the way I was, knowing nothing, but those outsider demons gave me a glimmer of hope. There's a great big world outside this forest! It's definitely there!"

With crazed, bloodshot eyes, the village chief—or the man who had been the village chief—went on quietly, intensely.

"I was thinking. Going out into the world with only my own life would feel really unsafe. However, *if all seventy-six people who live in this village became 'me'*—that would make for enough power to handle the outside world, too, wouldn't you say?"

The girl looked shocked, but before long, she got a firm grip on

her heart again and spoke, slowly but firmly.

“—I won’t let you do it.”

“Oh? And what exactly is scum like you going to keep me from doing?”

Dez sounded entertained, but the girl told him in no uncertain terms what she meant.

“Steal the villagers’ minds... I’ll never let you do that.”

Half-afraid, but with a strong resolve in her eyes, Fil took a step forward.

“I see. That’s great.”

With absolutely no hesitation or worry, Dez began opening the bottle.

“Stopp!!!”

With a cry that was almost a scream, Fil rushed at Dez. In an attempt to snatch the bottle from his right hand, she jumped as hard as she could.

In response, as if he’d been waiting for this very thing, Dez put his left hand into his jacket, pulled out a gleaming silver knife, and slashed diagonally at Fil’s arm.

A flash. Fil’s face twisted with a hot sensation of wrongness, and a moment later, her expression shifted into a grimace of pain.

“Good-for-nothing.”

As Dez glared at her, his eyes full of hatred, several drops of red mist struck his face.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah—!”

...But Fil didn’t stop. Without checking her momentum, she rammed into Dez with her whole body.

“Hunh?!”

The girl didn’t weigh much, and the body blow should have done almost nothing, but the ground around the well was frozen, and Dez’s feet slipped.

They fell together, beside the well, and began struggling fiercely.

Without the composure to act rationally, the girl howled like a wild animal—

...Several minutes later.

When the villagers who’d heard the uproar came to look, they saw...

...the figure of the “witch” they’d scorned, believing she was their inferior.

Her body was dappled with something red...and she was straddling another, fallen figure: the corpse of Dez Nibiru, the village headman. There was a silver knife stuck in his neck.



I wasn't trying to save the villagers.

On the contrary. I hate them.

But, more than that...I couldn't stand the idea of losing this world.

And so... And so I killed the headman. I killed Master Dez—no, I killed *Dez*!

I don't regret it. I'll never regret it, ever.

I finally remembered an emotion.

The emotion called “anger.” The emotion called “fear,” too.

I acted in obedience to those emotions.

I won't let him break this world. Not my world.

This village, this forest, is the only place for me.

I know. I understand. I did it all of my own free will.

“Ee... Yeeee!”

And so, I have no regrets.

“Th-the headman!”

“Dez!”

“This is awful!”

I'll never regret it, ever.

"Fil— Fil—! The cursed brat killed the headman!"

I knew; I understand everything.

“Dammit, I knew it! These things were the demon’s tools from the start!”

“So you acted meek and submissive to trick us?!”

I knew this would happen.

“Murderer!”

I knew they'd call me that.

“Demon!”

And that.

“Witch...!”

And that.

“Forget all we’ve done for you, will you...?!”

I knew.

"So you've finally shown your true colors!"

I know.

“That’s the last straw!”

—I know, I know, I know, I know! So enough, enough! I know, all right? I know already, so don't say anything else!

Don't say anything don't say anything don't say anything anything
anything anything anything anything anything anything anything
anything anything anything anything any any any any any any any
any any any any any any any a-a-a-ny-ny-ny-ny-ny a-a-a-ny-ny-ny-thi-

thing

The instant I hear that scream, I feel something inside me break.

I knew it. It really wasn't okay for me to dream, was it? I shouldn't have hoped, should I? If I'd never had any of that, I wouldn't have to feel this sad now.

I try to say something to Master Feldt—but a villager throws a rock that strikes me square in the side of the head, and the mind of the self in the village goes black.

"I'm sorry."

At the same time, someone speaks to me.

It's Master Elmer's voice, and I realize someone has put me into the cab of the iron cart. Master Elmer is on my right, stroking my head, and on my left, Master Maiza is gripping a wheel.

Rough vibrations rock me. A snowy road lies between the trees ahead, through the large pane of glass in front of us. The sun set long ago, but the area right in front of the cart is lit as brightly as if it were the middle of the day.

Just then, some sort of liquid begins to drip onto my hands in my lap.

Then I notice that tears are running down my cheeks. It happened that way earlier, too, with Master Czes. Apparently, I'm not managing my individual bodies' emotions well.

"Really, I'm sorry. After I'd made up my mind that the first tears I made you cry would be happy ones, or because you'd been laughing too hard..."

The moment I look at Master Elmer's face, instead of words, tears stream out endlessly.

I want to keep crying like that forever, but I can't. Right now, there's something I have to tell them, no matter what.

"...Ah...ster...is..."

"It's all right, calm down."

Master Elmer smiles at me kindly. It only makes me feel worse.

I feel as if I'm suffocating. Every time I try to exhale, I sob. Even so, I have to tell them. Even if my breath stops—even if my heart stops, I have to tell them...

"Ah—...Master, Czes was...*ugkh*...Master Czes! The villagers... took..."

I'm only able to tell them in fragments, but they seem to understand.

Master Maiza's lips tense, and the speed of the cart nearly doubles. As my back presses into the seat, I try to feel relieved that I managed to communicate what I'd most wanted to tell them. However, I realize that isn't allowed yet and stop myself. I try desperately to rein in my heart and its flood of tears.

Telling myself that both crying and smiling would have to wait until after we'd rescued Master Czes...

...I dry my face, and for the moment, I simply gaze straight ahead.



Hearing a crackling, popping sound, Czes slowly woke up.

His hands were bound tightly behind him; he couldn't move his arms at all. He was lying on the floor, and he could feel some sort of warmth on his back.

Around him, he could hear several people muttering. Thinking that it wouldn't be a good idea to open his eyes right away, Czes opened them a mere crack and scoped out the situation around him.

From what he could see, he seemed to be in a spacious room in somebody's house. The wooden walls were lit by a fierce, flickering red glow, in addition to lamplight. Apparently the crackling he'd been hearing was the sound of wood burning in a fireplace behind him.

Two other figures lay on the floor in front of Czes.

They were two of the five Fils. One was the Fil who'd been with Czes. The other was probably the village's lone remaining Fil.

What on earth happened? As far as I know, we didn't have any particular quarrel with the village over the past month... I wonder what Feldt's doing.

"Hey. I think he's awake."

One of the villagers had noticed Czes's slightly open eyes. He strode over to him, then slammed a kick into his side with his toes. The stabbing impact knocked the wind out of Czes for a moment.

"Gahk..."

"How're you feeling, demon spawn?"

As Czes coughed violently, a burly man looked down on him, spitting the words out.

"Frankly, when we grabbed you, we still didn't quite believe it, but when we got back to the village, we were sure. To think you'd try to poison the well...!"

What is he talking about? Czes was confused, but it seemed foolish to argue back and get himself kicked again, so for the moment, he decided to stay quiet and listen to what the villager said.

"Not only that, but when the headman tried to stop you, you stabbed him. This trash forgot the debt they owe the village for having put up with them all this time."

As he spoke, the man kicked Fil in the stomach. She seemed to be completely unconscious, and her little body only rose slightly.

“Stop it.”

Czes spoke in spite of himself and immediately regretted it. *Oh, that was stupid.*

“Shaddup!”

Another kick flew at Czes’s torso. He’d known it was coming this time, so it didn’t pack as much damage as the previous one.

Another ten or so villagers were standing behind the man, but they just watched Czes with revulsion, and no one tried to put a stop to the man’s violence.

He didn’t think the two Fils were awake yet; they just lay limply where they were. From the way their shoulders rose and fell slightly, they didn’t seem to be dead. For the moment, he could feel relieved about that, at least.

However, they couldn’t stay like this. In an attempt to get a grip on the situation, Czes spoke to the villagers.

“...Why did you kidnap me? You only found out about the poison after you brought me here, right?”

His voice was as childlike as his appearance, and several of the villagers exchanged bewildered looks. However, the man who’d launched that first kick spoke to Czes with a smirk.

“Quit pretending you’re a kid. We know you’re actually a three-hundred-year-old geezer and that, other than not dying, you’re only as strong as a real kid.”

At those words, Czes sighed. Feldt’s face came into his mind.

Did he tell them all that...? Honest little fool. There’s no help for that guy.

“...I see. All right, then. From now on, I’ll talk normally.”

Czes’s voice and expression had suddenly turned mature, and when they saw this, a stir ran through the villagers.

“Keh! So that’s what you really are, huh?”

He was talking tough, but the guy who’d landed the kick on him did seem creeped out. With one eye on him, Czes asked only what he wanted to know, sounding indifferent.

“This is just a request, but... Who was it that came up with the plan to kidnap me, and why?”

The kicker turned to the other villagers, but no one tried to stop him.

“Right, well, you looked like the weakest one. We figured we’d wait for you to get careless, then nab you, use you as a hostage, and round up the other monsters.”

“...A hostage, when you knew I wouldn’t die? Why?”

The question was only natural. However, the man who’d kicked him answered with no confusion whatsoever.

“There’s all sorts of ways to do it. We could take you to the village

forge, say, and *mix you up with molten iron*, then sink you to the bottom of the well.”

Imagining this, Czes felt a little dismal. It would be one thing if they put him on the bottom of the ocean; Maiza and the others would probably still save him. However, if they fused him with molten iron, would it even be possible for him to return to normal completely? That was the one thing that worried him.

Indifferent to Czes’s private thoughts, the man tried to threaten him as menacingly as he could. His build was clearly different from those of the villagers behind him. He was probably the one outlaw who always seemed to turn up in any group.

“Besides—maybe you can’t die, but you can feel pain, yeah?”

With those words, the man took something that looked like pliers out of his jacket.

“*Ghk...*”

Torture. As that word crossed his mind, terror blazed up in Czes’s heart.

He had a vivid recollection of the hell he’d been subjected to on that train seventy years ago.

Noticing that Czes’s expression had clouded over, the man gave a satisfied smirk and clicked the pliers together.

Seeing this, Czes spoke frantically. His palms were growing sweaty.

“Wait, please. Before that, I want to know... Who was it that put this plan together?”

Czes was positive that the answer to his question would be “Dez,” and he’d only asked it to distract himself from his fear, but—

The resulting answer dashed cold water over his heart.

The name belonged to a person he’d never have suspected.

“*Feldt.*”

Involuntarily, Czes raised his head, scanning the villagers who stood farther back.

However, from the way they looked, the man wasn’t lying.

“He’s been setting up this plan for several days now, for the sake of the village. I knew Feldt had it in ’im! He managed to throw you lot completely off guard. Ol’ Dez was useless, but if this guy’s gonna be the next headman, we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Good God.

Czes was completely disgusted by his own foolishness. Logically, the idea was entirely possible. As a matter of fact, considered calmly, he might have been a more likely possibility than Dez. Even so, until this very moment, Czes had believed in him completely...even though he’d only talked to him for a day.

“Well, that takes the cake.”

Feeling as though he'd gone hopelessly soft, Czes sighed self-consciously.

"And here I thought I was used to being sold out. I've been through several things in the past that were much, much worse than this, and yet..."

Shaking his head in disappointment, he realized his heart had actually calmed down. His tone had naturally reverted to a child's unique cadences, and the sights and sounds around him seemed vivid and clear.

"It hasn't happened in a while, and this reminded me. I forgot it hurt so much."

"Wh-what?"

Although Czes's attitude bewildered him, the man prepared to strip off one of his fingernails with the pliers, but...

Czes looked at his face. Then he looked at the faces of the villagers behind him. He'd seen those expressions somewhere before. The emotion in the depths of their faces was...fear. Their eyes were those of people about to inflict violence on him in order to cover up their own fear.

This is different. They're nothing like that monster.

Recalling the menace from seventy years ago, Czes compared it to the people in front of him. He couldn't feel any terror for these people. On the contrary... He realized that they looked just like the immortal who'd once tried to kill him because he was afraid.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The instant Czes understood that, a great laugh burst from his lips.

It made the villagers freeze, but his voice seemed to have roused the two Fils. They gave little groans, and their bodies rocked and shifted.

"Oh, I see... I see. In the end, you're just the same. Yes, you're all the same, Fermet and the people of this village. You're exactly the same. Of course you are. That's normal, isn't it? That's right."

Beaming in a way that was entirely at odds with the situation, Czes got to his feet, dexterously, using only his knees. He wasn't laughing at the situation, but rather his past self.

Violent confusion ran through the villagers at this sudden turn of events, but still, his hands were tied, and the idea that he couldn't do anything against numbers like these let them stand their ground.

However...in the next instant, Czes did something none of them had predicted.

"I see. Then it's just like Elmer said. I've been living in the midst of miraculously good luck! To think I never noticed how lucky I was..."

It's hilarious. It's as if I took my own happiness and threw it into the ditch with my own two hands!"

As he finished shouting that long speech...

Czes leaped back—*right into the blazing fireplace.*

At that, all the villagers shuddered, shrinking back in spite of themselves. Even as they watched, Czes's upper body was enveloped in flames...and the rope that had bound his arms burned away, freeing his hands.

When he was sure of this, Czes stood. His upper half was still shrouded in flames. The fire hadn't spread to the rest of him, but the clothes on his upper body, still alight, had mostly charred away.

Half his face was hideously burned, but as the villagers watched, the flesh immediately began to heal.

Even if he was immortal, he must have been feeling ferocious pain far beyond heat. However, even under those circumstances, Czes was smiling brightly.



“Move.”

Murmuring just one word, he walked right past the man who'd kicked him. The man gave a pitiful shriek, retreating into the midst of the other villagers in the blink of an eye.

The bandage that had been wound around Czes's right arm burned off, revealing a long, gleaming silver scalpel. Slipping it into his hand, the boy cut the ropes of the two girls who lay in front of him.

Ignoring the fact that his upper body was still on fire in places, Czes smiled and spoke to the villagers.

“I told you to move. I need to go find Elmer.”

Tearing off his flaming jacket, he advanced, step by step.

“I have to go smile for him. I'll smile enough to make up for all the smiling I haven't done. I'm going to do that right in front of him... So *move*.”

At that, Czes threw his blazing jacket at the other side of the room, at the spot where the group of villagers was thickest. With that as the trigger, fierce screams went up from the crowd.

Without even bothering to watch them, Czes turned to the girls, who'd managed to get to their feet on their own.

“All right. Let's go.”

“Ah... O-okay!”

Striding through the villagers, who were running every which way in their attempts to escape, Czes took the two Fils and headed outside.

However...when he reached the entrance of the home, he stopped.

The house was on the village's main street, and a crowd of villagers who'd heard the uproar had gathered in front of it. Several of them had guns pointed their way. The villagers' eyes held more fear than hostility, and feeling a little dazed, Czes thought, *That headman really wasn't popular, was he...?*

Had Fil actually killed the village chief? He wanted to ask, but it looked as if they'd have more than enough trouble just getting out of this situation.

He was one thing, but if the Fils got shot, that would be it. That said, even if both these girls stopped moving, Fil wouldn't die. She only needed one body to survive.

“What should we do...?”

Hiding in the shadows by the door, Czes thought hard, twirling the scalpel in his fingers.

All the other villagers had fled outside. Should they search the house for a back door, or wait until someone came in and use the scalpel to take them hostage...?

As he was standing there thinking, he heard a horse whinny.

“Oh...”

One of the Fils made a noise, as if she'd remembered something. She had: After she'd sobbed out the news about Czes to Maiza and Elmer, the two bodies that were still at the castle had involuntarily done the same thing.

Her mind had been thrown into confusion, and she didn't have a clear memory of what had happened after that, but apparently one of her selves had come here on horseback from the castle.

“Czeeeeeees!”

The villagers held up pine torches and lanterns, and, running through the midst of an uproar that had begun to include gunshots...

...a masked man gave a bellowing roar that seemed to boom through the whole village.

“It's them! One of his friends is here!”

“Dammit! It's too soon!”

“Shoot him! *Shoot him!*”

“I-it's no good. Let's just run—”

“No running! There's no going back now!”

Plowing his way through the villagers' angry shouts, Nile came galloping down the village's main road on horseback. Skillfully guiding his horse over the snow, he spotted the house at the center of the crowd and made straight for its entrance.

Several gunshots rang out, but they didn't even graze the mounted Nile. They probably would have done better to aim at the horse, but in all the confusion, no one tried it. They might have been hunters, but they had no experience with shooting at people on horseback, and it didn't seem to be working for them. In the first place, in a village this small, there was no telling what kind of game the hunters normally pursued.

Nile's insolent mask shone as if it was mocking the people who were running around in an attempt to flee, and he leaped down from his horse with a flourish right in front of the door where Czes and the others were hiding.

“Nile!”

Without thinking, Czes gave a cry of delight, but Nile's response was displeasure incarnate.

“Let me just say this: Right now, I could not be angrier.”

“Huh?”

Czes thought he might have done something, and question marks surfaced in his mind, but...

“Whatever their reasons, the unmitigated gall of setting fire to my comrade—! It's settled. I'll massacre the lot of them.”

Apparently, having seen Czes's appearance as he hid in the shadow of the door, he'd gotten the impression that the villagers had tried to burn him alive.

"No, I did this myse—"

Before Czes could explain the circumstances, Nile had already leaped into the midst of the villagers. Since he'd landed right where the crowd was thickest, the ones who had guns couldn't fire.

"Ah, waaaaaugh!"

"Get him! Look, he's unarmed!"

As fear and hostility surged, one aggressive villager plunged a farming hoe into Nile's body.

"Gnrgh..."

"Diiiie!"

He tried to shove the tool in even further, but, abruptly, it refused to budge.

"Huh?"

Nile's hand had clamped around the hoe's handle, and, with its tip still stuck in his stomach, he twisted his body dramatically.

"Aaaaaaah!"

The force was so great that the villager involuntarily let go of the tool, and Nile yanked it from his stomach. That series of actions had to have been excruciatingly painful, but no one heard a single groan from behind his mask.

Claiming the implement as his own, Nile confronted them with an astounding display of hoe-fighting that could have been taken straight from classical Chinese opera. The large tool spun ferociously. It was obvious to everyone that no one could touch it and remain unscathed. For the moment, Nile set his sights on the hoe's previous wielder and raised the weapon high in the air.

It was an absolutely pointless move, but he was probably planning to kill the first one in grand style and quash the enemy's collective will to fight.

"Let me just say this: I am not like Elmer. I do not know how to seal my own wrath, and you—and this village—have angered me... So die. Be shamed by your ignorance, rue your actions, lament your sin—and sink into an ever-widening sea of blood."

Even though he knew they couldn't understand what he was saying, Nile quietly put his own rage into words. Then he began to flex his arms, preparing to bring the hoe down.

"Wait! Nile!"

Thinking that killing someone would be a bad move, Czes hastily tried to stop him, but—

Even before Czes's voice reached him, Nile's hoe stopped dead.

From the other end of the village's main road, he'd heard the

vehement honking of a car horn.

“Hmm. They’re back, are they?”

Regaining a little of his composure, Nile turned his gaze toward the road’s beginning.

The villagers also looked in the direction of the clamor—and then *began to run around as fast as they could*, trying to escape.

What had come into view at the end of the road was an enormous truck barreling along at the insane speed of fifty miles an hour.

It was the trader’s vehicle, the one the villagers were used to seeing, but as it raced toward them through the night, lights blazing, it was no less than the embodiment of terror.

The villagers fled, screaming, and the truck devoured the road with such force it nearly crushed them. Only Nile stayed right where he was, without moving a step; he raised a hand to the truck’s occupants, most likely Maiza and the others.

Whump.

...Then it knocked him into the air.

The truck had started to slow down, but apparently the driver had hit the brakes too late. It hadn’t been able to fully stop before it reached Nile and plowed into him.

“Nile! Are you all right?!”

Maiza leaped out of the driver’s seat and ran up to the man, who’d landed beside Czes and the others.

As the blood streaming from his entire body retreated inside him again, Nile jumped straight to his feet and hauled Maiza up by his collar.

“If you have an excuse, Maiza, then speak.”

“I’m sorry! I thought you’d dodge! You didn’t move at all, so I slammed on the brakes, but...”

“I will hear no excuses.”

Just as Nile prepared to pay out a wrath-fueled teraton punch, Elmer yelled from the front passenger seat:

“Forget that; just get in!”

He looked sorry, as if he really would have liked to see the rest of the exchange, but for now, he’d prioritized the rest of their situation.

“*Rrgh*, our talk will wait. First, let us escape. We’ll massacre the villagers after that.”

Immediately regaining his composure, Nile climbed into the back of the truck, saying something incredibly dangerous as he did so.

Several gunshots peppered the stopped truck, but it was a modified military vehicle, and old-fashioned bullets did nothing to it.

“I’m flooring it!”

As Maiza yelled, the engine roared, and they shot away down the dark road like a cannonball.



Ten minutes later.

Four immortals and four homunculi walked along the dark mountain road.

Without his coat, Czes had passed out from the cold, and Nile was carrying him on his back.

As if to break the silence, which had dragged on for a while, Elmer began to speak in his usual joking way.

“Out of gas... I think that’s a funny punch line. Whaddaya say? We could all laugh about it.”

“Let me just say this: Shut your mouth before I strike you, Elmer.”

Partway down the road that led back to the castle, the engine had suddenly stopped, and Elmer had realized that the “low fuel” light was on. Maiza had apparently been aware of it, but he’d decided that saving Czes and the others was top priority and pretended not to see it.

That said, even if Elmer had noticed it, he probably would have prioritized rescuing Czes, too.

“In any case, let’s return to the castle quickly and pick up Sylvie and Fil.”

“Mm. Can we fit everyone in the four-wheel drive, though?”

“If necessary, I think we could fit twenty people. I heard about an incident in a country somewhere in which several dozen refugees were packed into a station wagon. Besides, we could also transfer the gasoline into the truck before the villagers catch up to us.”

After Maiza gave a brief explanation of the situation, they conversed for some time like this. However, when they’d very nearly reached the castle, the Fils abruptly stopped in their tracks.

“What’s the matter?”

The four Fils were silent for a little while. Then, as if they’d made up their minds, they murmured:

“...I’m going back to the village.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Elmer looked completely mystified. The four girls lowered their eyes and went on.

“No matter what my reasons were, I am the one who killed the headman. I must atone for it.”

“No need.”

The immediate declaration had come from the masked man.

“Even if you go, they will not listen to a word you say. They will torment you to death as the miscreant who attempted to poison the village.”

“...I’m prepared for that. I don’t mind. Even if they have the wrong idea about me, if it will make the villagers—and Master Feldt, whose father was killed—feel a little better, then...”

Before she could finish her sentence, Nile hauled one of the Fils up by the scruff of her neck. On the snowy road, lit only by moonlight, Nile’s mask glared into the girl’s face with a mute expression.

“Let me just say this: I am angry. I am filled with ire. One might even call it wrath. You said you did not mind your own death. However, I will say this. Allow me to say this! It does not matter whether you can accept it! They persecuted you for unjust reasons, and on top of it, they intend to kill you without knowing the truth of the matter! I tell you this—let me say this! I know that the suspicion cast on you is false. Do you imagine, even so, that we would let you be sacrificed and allow the villagers to live on without a care in the world, simply to reconcile the situation? Even if you would permit it, *I myself will not.*”

As Nile spoke in quiet anger, Fil listened, looking as if she might cry.

“Let me be clear. If even one of you sheds a single drop of blood at their hands...”

Slowly lowering the girl to the ground, Nile finished his speech, softly.

“Then let me just say this. I will slaughter the lot of them. With your strength, you could never stop me.”

With that, Nile moved to walk back toward the castle, but...

...a voice without the slightest hint of tension in it spoke behind him.

“That’s no good. That’s completely out of the question.”

At the sound of that voice, Nile stopped in his tracks again and looked at the man who’d spoken so lightly.

However, Elmer’s expression was unexpectedly serious. As he spoke, he looked back and forth between Nile and the girls.

“If you do that, the villagers won’t ever be happy. You can’t kill them. Oh, of course, it’d be even worse if you went back, Fil. No points for that one. That’s absolutely positively no good.”

“What is this naïve nonsense? Even if Fil does not return, I could cheerfully raze this village with a napalm bomb. How could I possibly consider their happiness? Even with Szilard, you—”

Interrupting Nile, who was launching into a lengthy sermon,

Elmer spoke firmly, "It's not just the villagers. We won't be happy, either. Not you, or me, or these kids."

At those words, the mask grew as taciturn as its expression. However, Nile wasn't ignoring him. He seemed to be silently telling him to continue.

As if prompted by that gesture, Elmer quietly began to speak.

"Say you did kill all the villagers, Nile. They're selfish, and I bet they'd think, 'Oh, we've been killed by a demon. We lived right, we never did anything wrong, so why did this happen to us? That's it, we knew it: Those girls sold their souls to the devil.'—Right? Could you stand that? Could you allow it? You couldn't, could you? We want to *show* those villagers. Dez aside, we want to take the ones who joined him in his violence, inflicting abuse for absolutely no reason, and make them regret what they did. Am I right?"

On hearing Elmer, who'd spoken nearly as long as he himself had, Nile was silent for a while. Then, abruptly, he spun to face forward and spoke as he made for the castle:

"If possible, I would like to show them as well. However, I doubt it is possible."

As if agreeing with him, Maiza added sadly, "I know how you feel, but... Now that things have grown this complicated, I imagine it would be nearly impossible to correct the villagers' misunderstanding."

After they'd walked a little ways, Nile spat out a continuation. "Thunderation, this tale has no archfiend. The man at the heart of all the evil was eaten and killed more than seventy years ago! No matter how things end, it can only leave a bad aftertaste!"

His words seemed half-resigned, but Elmer objected quietly, "That's not true. I know the world's not that obliging. Obviously it isn't. Still, as long as there's a chance, I'm not giving up."

He muttered the rest as if he were speaking to himself. "Smiles don't betray me. And so—I can't betray them, either."

"*That* is the conclusion you reached, after living three hundred years?! Shallow. Utterly ridiculous."

"It wasn't three hundred years. I came to that conclusion long before I became immortal. It's just that revising all the little details would have been a pain, so I haven't."

Elmer's answer held no hesitation, and Nile shook his head as if he'd given up.

"As I traveled around battlefields, I saw the deaths of countless men with such naïve thoughts."

"Well, yeah. Of course you did. On battlefields, you survive by sinking everything you've got into killing the other guy in order to protect something. People who are considerate to the enemy can't

survive there. *That's why I'm here.* Precisely because I can't die, I'll force this idea through with everything I've got. Actually, I think I have to. Though it is an awfully arrogant, cowardly idea. But even so."

"Clumsy oaf."

"Yeah, I'm clumsy. That's why it's tough for me to settle on another way to live at this point. Right... For the sake of a happy ending, I'd sell everyone in the world to the devil without a second thought."

"...That's a contradiction."

Maiza pointed this out for form's sake, but inwardly, he somehow understood that this was Elmer's true nature.

Elmer C. Albatross would do absolutely *anything* for a happy ending.

"I really do wish you had the talent for comedy."

"Huh? I...don't? No good? I'll never be Andy Kaufman or Jim Carrey?"

"Actions aside, your jokes only irritate those around you... Well, I suppose if you took away Andy's talent, the result might be you."

"It feels like you just said something horrible to me, but I'm sure it was my imagination. I believe in you, Maiza."

"If you believe in me, then take my words at face value, if you would."

"You're not Maiza, are you?! Argh, who are you?! State your name!"

Elmer attempted to return to their meaningless conversation, but he abruptly turned around and spoke to the Fils.

"Well, in any case, let's go to the castle. We'll talk things over once we get there."

Elmer gave her a carefree smile, but for some reason, she didn't move.

"Hmm?"

Thinking that this was odd, Maiza and Elmer walked up to her—and found all four Fils shivering hard.

Then, looking up at Elmer with terrified faces, they murmured:

"De...mon... A demon—a monster just— Mistress Sylvie! From the library... There's a staircase in the library... It took her down there, underground!"

"Gah!"

At her cry, Nile tossed Czes's body to Maiza.

"Take care of him, Maiza."

"I'm going, too," Elmer said.

Leaving Maiza there, Elmer and Nile broke into a run, headed into the castle. As they dashed forward, Nile called to Elmer in search of

confirmation:

“Let me just ask this: Do you have any idea what the castle’s monster might be?”

“None! That’s why I’m running!”



CHAPTER 5
(SMILE)

Elmer C. Albatross

CHAPTER 5

(SMILE)

Elmer C. Albatross

In the graveyard, which was some distance from the castle, Sylvie was tied to one of the trees that grew around the perimeter. She was bound not with cord but with something hard as concrete that cast a strange shadow. She could make out that much, but the moonlight wasn't enough to let her discern its color.

"What are you planning to do with me, exactly?"

Sylvie's question sounded rather troubled, but she didn't seem very tense.

The figure she'd spoken to sat on a tombstone, muttering as if he was bored.

"I just want knowledge, that's all. Knowledge from you 'immortals.' I thought I'd torture that Czes brat and take him over when I'd weakened his spirit... I never dreamed things would turn out like this. Frankly, I'm not sure what to do now."

The shadow in front of her tilted his head, looking thoroughly perplexed.

"If possible, I'd rather not 'steal' you. You helped me quite a bit, and it would be weird for me to acquire a female body this late in the game."

"You don't think my mind might win?"

"I'd win. You've already achieved your goal, right? You got eternal beauty. I still have a big goal. You won't beat me."

"Want to try me?"

At Sylvie's taunt, the figure thought for a while, then murmured, "I'll pass."

The shadow had fallen silent. She spoke to him again.

"You know what I think?" Sylvie went on, talking to the expressionless figure. "A witch who wanted to be the fairest in the world may do all sorts of awful things to make that happen. Still, once she's gotten her wish, she thinks, 'All my wishes have come true, so from now on, I'll live to grant other people's wishes.' It does depend on how bad the awful things were, but don't you think that's a good plan? Couldn't that be a goal?"

In response to that suggestion, the shadow thought for a little while...then murmured in a vaguely resigned voice:

“I’m sure I wouldn’t have that kind of leeway.”



“I brought a light from the car.”

“You’re late. What are you loitering for...? You stink of oil.”

“Well, I didn’t know where in the car it was.”

When they reached the library that held the entrance to the castle’s secret passage, Elmer and Nile were immediately startled to find the room in a shambles.

Almost all the bookshelves had toppled, as if a tornado had blown through.

“Fil!”

One of the Fils lay in the corner of the room. She seemed to be merely unconscious, and her life was in no danger. When they shook her, her eyes opened almost immediately, and she began to tell them about the devastation in detail.

“A strange monster suddenly appeared—it grabbed Mistress Sylvie—it threw me, along with the bookshelves...”

As Elmer and Nile gulped at the sight of the wreckage, they switched the light on, then stepped onto the staircase that led underground. They’d said they’d leave Fil behind, but in the end, because it was what she wanted and because it was probably dangerous for her to be alone, they took her with them.

Then, as they made their way through the tunnel to the graveyard...Nile muttered, sounding mystified, “...This passage used to have dirt walls partway through...”

In the light of the lamp, the tunnel walls were stone from start to finish. There wasn’t a trace of the red clay Nile and Maiza had seen earlier.

When Nile pushed the gravestone up, he was confronted by the sight of Sylvie bound to a tree.

“Oh, it’s you. So the tiresome one showed up.”

From behind him, he heard a young man’s voice.

Nile turned, his body language tense. The individual who stood there was a perfect stranger to him.

Next, Elmer poked his head out and saw the figure’s face.

“Huh...? Aren’t you—?”

Behind the puzzled Elmer, Fil appeared and screamed the man's name.

"Master Feldt!"

She cried out, startled, and at the sight of the boy's face under the moonlight, her eyes swam distractedly. She couldn't get her head around the circumstances, and she seemed to have been thrown into mild shock.

"Good day. Mr. Nile, wasn't it? ...This is the first time I've met you *as Feldt Nibiru*."

He greeted him, playing the courteous boy—then, still in the boy's voice, he shifted into a disagreeably arrogant tone and continued his self-introduction.

"And, *as Dez Nibiru*, it's been a while, masked demon!"

For a moment, the three of them froze. Before long, though, Elmer seemed to realize something and muttered:

"Headman... Don't tell me... You gave that 'water' to your own son—?"

In a way, what Elmer had said would have been the worst possible outcome, but the boy quietly shook his head.

"Unfortunately, you're wrong... My son died fifteen years ago. Soon after he was born, just as if he'd gone to sleep."

Seating himself on one of the tombstones, Feldt began to talk, as if giving them a souvenir from the afterlife.

"I didn't know what illness it was, but he really did look like he was only sleeping. I'd married the daughter of the village headman, and it happened just when I thought I was set for life."

He'd nearly risen to the top of his world—this village—and right after he'd been promised the position of future headman, he'd lost his child. In order to hide the fact from his wife, he'd infiltrated the laboratory. He'd lied to his wife, telling her he was going to have the traders take a look at their sick child, and had injected the 'water' into a tank used to cultivate his own body. The fetus had grown up well... And from that point on, until his wife died of an illness, and even afterward, he'd used one mind to act separate roles for "Dez" and "Feldt," deceiving everyone around him.

In order to make Feldt, who acted the part of the son, appear especially capable, he'd made the father, Dez, come off as selfish and demanding. Even when Elmer had come to the village, this hadn't changed...but something in his heart had begun to waver.

Outside. Now that his wife was gone and he had no one to tie him to this place, would it be possible for him to get into the outside world from that laboratory? Although the thought was faint, deep in his heart, he'd begun to think it.

Then, the other day, he'd heard about "outside" from Sylvie, and the idea had become his reason for living.

"Listening to those stories about the outside was like hearing about a dream, and it made me think."

Sitting on the tombstone, the boy looked up at the night sky rather sadly, and the hatred in his voice grew.

"...If this village hadn't been so isolated—if I'd taken them to a proper doctor in the outside world, my son, and my wife... Maybe they wouldn't have had to die!"

At that point, seemingly overcome with emotion, he got up from the gravestone and spread his arms wide in an exaggerated gesture.

"I've always hated it! This village, created just for an experiment, and those girls, and myself! So I made up my mind, long ago! When I left this village..."

Reflecting the faint moonlight, the boy's golden eyes glittered madly.

Fixing that gaze on the girl beside Elmer, he wrapped up his tale.

"...I would destroy the entire thing."

In response, Elmer seemed to brood over something for a little while, while Fil was petrified with shock. Sylvie was silent, clearly thinking. Only one of them—Nile—spoke, radiating dignity.

"Hmm. I understand your story very well. In that case, I may slaughter you now, correct?"

"Good grief. You're an impatient one, aren't you?"

"Let me just say this: Shut up. The outside world holds ten billion people less fortunate than you. I have no sympathy whatsoever for those who use their unhappiness to fuel unjustified resentment."

Tossing those words off bluntly, Nile took a step forward, ready to break the kid's neck, but—

"Ah, Nile, hang on a minute."

Elmer raised his voice in an attempt to stop him, but—

Before he could, something coiled around Nile's feet.

"Nn?"

In the next instant, his body was hanging upside down, high in the air. Then it was slammed to the ground.

"Gwah!"

Nile had hit his back hard and was looking up at the sky. Something huge loomed over him.

"Remember what I told you? I dumped the 'water' into the tank! Even the lump of meat that was slated to turn into me reacted to it! That's what it looks like now! In this state, life span and growth don't mean a thing! I may actually be an immortal!"

The thing was an enormous, dark red clump of meat. It was what might have resulted if rotten meat had been forced through a grinder, and it squirmed like a slime monster from a video game, radiating an unpleasant humidity. There was no telling what its actual volume was, but it seemed big enough for two whole cows.

“Go on, take a good, long look! Then pity it, laugh at it, fear it—this is the me that failed to become me! Ha-ha! Ha! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha—”

The homunculus in the shape of a boy.

Feldt’s laugh was filled with insanity, and as he listened to it, Elmer murmured.

The soft whisper didn’t reach anyone’s ears and vainly disappeared into the cold air.

“Stop it... Don’t fake laughter...”



When Maiza and the others heard the story from Fil and came running, they saw a sight that could only be described as bizarre. An enormous red mass of meat scraps had enfolded Elmer and Nile and was slamming them both against the ground by turns.

“Well, well. Has the cavalry arrived?”

At Feldt’s remark, Maiza cursed under his breath.

“All right,” Feldt continued. “Should I take this opportunity to negotiate with you?”

Expression brimming with sarcasm, the boy made Maiza an offer.

“Negotiate?” Maiza wondered just what sort of negotiations he meant, but the next words explained that quite succinctly.

“I think I’m going to have somebody drink my ‘water’ and attempt to take over their mind. Why don’t I let you choose who it will be?”

“How long?”

When he’d been slammed down about twenty times, Nile muttered:

“Huh?”

“A moment ago, you said, ‘Hang on a minute.’ How long must I wait?”

At that, Elmer remembered what he’d said to Nile a short while ago.

“Let me just say this: I will wait one minute more. If you fail to do something—then I will counterattack in earnest. I will kill this meat,

and that idiot, and everyone in the village. If you do not want that, then do something about this.”

After he'd thought about Nile's proposal for about three seconds, Elmer muttered back, “You sounded pretty cool there, but... Don't tell me you don't have any ideas, and you're trying to cover up the fact that you're counting on me?”

“That ill-advised remark of yours just decreased the time to thirty seconds.”

“W-wait, wait! ...All right.”

With an expression that seemed to say there was no help for it, still hanging upside down...Elmer brought up the contents of his stomach. The liquid that spurted from his mouth splashed all over the meat fragments Feldt was controlling.

Simultaneously, a pungent, acrid odor spread through the area. The smell that had been hanging around Elmer for the past few minutes was now several times stronger, and it enveloped their surroundings.

Oil?! No, that's not it—what is this stuff?!

Noticing the sudden stench, Feldt hastily turned around, flustered.

“Fil, run! Maiza— *Don't let him get away!*”

Maiza, who'd realized what the smell was immediately, had begun to move even before the words reached him.

Seizing his chance when Feldt was distracted, he put him in a headlock. The boy wasn't strong enough to shake Maiza off, and Maiza turned him to face the clump of meat.

“It sounds as though you heard about all sorts of ‘outside’ things from Sylvie, but... You don't yet know how dangerous gasoline is, do you?”

Then, in the next instant—he took the flashlight he was holding and dashed it, still lit, against a tombstone.

Something like sparks scattered from the broken lightbulb, and—

A red flash enveloped a portion of the night's darkness.



“Well, there was a monster on the loose, and I couldn't go in completely unprepared, so...”

“...Still. To think you'd drink gasoline...”

Nile spoke as if he was disgusted, but Elmer only cackled away with his usual smile. “Startled you, didn't I? Smile... Yech, I still feel

nasty. Gasoline really isn't meant to be drunk. If I weren't immortal, I'd be dead."

The scale of the explosion hadn't been big. After all, the capacity of human stomachs wasn't much. However, the sudden blast had scattered Feldt's meat fragments. When they caught fire, they writhed in pain, and then nature took its course and they burned away. Of course Nile and Elmer hadn't escaped unscathed either, but the supernatural had also taken its course, and they'd regenerated.

A smell like barbecued meat mingled with the odor of gasoline to create a nauseating stench.

As for the key figure, Feldt—

"Ahh...ah... AaAaaaaAAh..."

"Hmm. Well, that is only natural."

The boy lay faceup, hollow-eyed. His entire body was twitching.

"He felt himself burn, after all. Not only that, but over a much wider area than any human."

"Immolation is rough, you know, even if it isn't your first time."

As Maiza spoke of experiences only an immortal could have, Elmer took the fallen Feldt in his arms and tried to help him sit up.

"Hey."

Even though he knew it was no good, Nile tried to stop him, but Elmer answered with his usual smile.

"I did something about it in a minute, as promised. I'll be taking this guy."

"Elmer, you say 'taking,' but—"

In the instant Maiza spoke with some dismay—

Feldt's stomach split, and meat fragments *burst out from inside*.

"Wha...?!"

"Elmer!"

By the time they'd noticed, it was already too late. The meat fragments, holding something that looked like a small bottle, had leaped into Elmer's mouth.

"Muh-gwuh-gah-gah!"

Defying the will of his esophagus, the little bottle and the meat fragments descended into Elmer's stomach. At the same time, the boy, who was bleeding heavily from his abdomen, laughed as if victory was his.

"Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. You fell for it, monster... Did you seriously think I'd keep all the meat fragments in one place? ...What you just swallowed is the bottle with the 'water.'"

"You wretch...!"

When Nile grabbed the scruff of his neck and hauled him up, Feldt spat out blood with a wet, choking sound. "When I break—that bottle—you and I will start trying to take over each other's will... I—bet my

life on it. If I—fail here—I'll die. I'll disappear from the face of the Earth—I can't die. *I'm going to see the outside world!* As far as strength of will is concerned, we're equal now, or rather, I'm stronger!"

The spiritual theory he'd set forth was ludicrous, but as Feldt lay dying, his gaze held a firmer resolve than it ever had before.

In spite of themselves, Maiza and the others were terrified. Only Elmer was still smiling, just like always.

Apparently Feldt really didn't like that; he glared at Elmer with hate-filled eyes.

"Why...are you smiling...? Aren't you...afraid to die...?"

"Yep. But I'm the one who's going to win this match. Count on it."

At those abrupt words, which had been delivered without a shred of apprehension, Feldt's gaze clouded.

"What...kind of...nonsense..."

"Before you break it, let me give you one warning. Your actions will be absolutely pointless."

What Elmer did next *really* made Maiza's blood run cold.

Everyone in the area gulped. If Czes had been there, he probably would have been the only one to stay calm as events unfolded.

Elmer took Maiza's right hand and *placed it on his own forehead*.

That was all he'd done.

"If I lose, Maiza will eat me on the spot. —You can't survive this."

Elmer was smiling brightly. In response, greasy sweat from something other than pain began to trickle down Feldt's face.

"No... You wouldn't..."

For a moment, despair came into his face, but soon he regained his composure, and the light returned to his eyes.

"You...fool. You...think...that...would...be..."

"You just thought of using my memories and pretending to be me, didn't you."

"!"

"Okay, then let's do this. Maiza, if that bottle breaks, eat me right then."

"Understood."

Which is it? Which?! Is it an act, or is it—?

At that point, Feldt hesitated for a few seconds.

—Not realizing that as far as he was concerned, the pause would be fatal.

“It’s done.”

Abruptly, the tension in Maiza’s face dissolved—and Feldt sensed that something was wrong with his meat fragments.

It felt as if they were being compressed from all sides... The moment he thought that, Maiza thrust his left hand out at the boy on the ground.

At that point, finally, Feldt realized that he’d lost. This time, despair shrouded his heart.

After all, Maiza’s left hand gripped the clump of meat that should have been in Elmer’s stomach...and the bottle of “water” was in Elmer’s right hand.

“Surprised?”

Ignoring Elmer, who was grinning with great amusement, Maiza heaved a massive sigh, breaking out in a cold sweat.

To think that while he was on his feet, negotiating with me...he’d cut open his stomach...

By grabbing Maiza’s right hand, Elmer had created a blind spot for Feldt, and in its shadow, Maiza had used his knife to slit Elmer’s belly. From where the boy lay, facing up, he wouldn’t be able to see the blood dripping to the ground behind Maiza’s long coat, and— And they’d pulled all that off without discussing it beforehand.

“I haven’t lived this long for nothing. You give it your best shot, too.”

As Elmer spoke, he examined the wound in Feldt’s own stomach.

The gash he found there was far bigger than what he’d anticipated.

“Uh...Maiza? What do you think?”

Maiza took a close look at the wound. Then he sighed and shook his head.

“Not a chance.”

At that... For the first time, Elmer looked sad.

“I wanted to save you, but...”

“Hunh... So I...guess...things...didn’t go...your, way... Serves... you right...”

Feldt spoke as if he’d summoned up the last of his strength to do it. In response, Elmer made a quiet “pronouncement”:

“Once you’re dead, I’ll smile.”

“...?”

“I don’t let dead people bother me. If someone’s died a meaningful

death, I'll applaud them, and I don't mind smiling for them, but if *you* die, that fact will be the only thing left. And so...I won't give any more thought to you. We'll all just say, 'The bad guy's dead, woohoo!' and laugh. That's it."

"Wha..."

Feldt tried to say something, but Elmer cut him off with a murmur, still smiling.

"Listen. Just now, you said it 'served me right,' didn't you? You wanted to make me sad, and you achieved your goal. Right?"

At that, Feldt realized something. He was forced to realize it.

"In that case, as far as you're concerned, *this is a happy ending. — So smile.*"

Evil.

If it was possible to neatly divide the world into "good" and "bad," then this Elmer fellow was unmistakably evil. —Or rather, he was a being that could truly be called "a demon."

It was hard to spot only because what he wanted just happened to be happy endings. They were the only thing he saw. For the sake of his own objective, he'd use any means available. His essential nature was pure evil... And even so, no one suffered for it.

A consummate villain who probably wasn't even aware that he was one—that was Elmer.

As his mind faded, Feldt fiercely regretted his foolishness in having dealt seriously with a person like that.

Whether or not he knew what was in the boy's heart, Elmer murmured briefly:

"If you don't like it, then don't die."

He looked sad, and Fil, who had been watching from a distance, began to come closer.

"It's over, isn't it...?" Maiza sighed.

"No, I don't want to let it be over. Dammit, if we only had a doctor here—"

Even as she heard those words, a ferocious anger was welling up inside Fil.



I'm mad. That was all it is.

Of course the fact that I'd been deceived had been a shock.

...But what of it?

What I'm mad about now...is the fact that Feldt is taking his own life much too lightly.

Was I like this, too, a few minutes ago? If so, it's no wonder that Master Nile got angry. Everything, including my own irritation, boils inside me until it's on the verge of exploding.

Why, oh *why* must he toy with me any way he pleases?!

I've suffered so much because of Feldt's selfish logic, and now he's trying to run away without letting me lodge a single complaint?

I can't forgive him for that.

I will probably be able to forgive everything he'd done before, someday. However—this one thing I can't forgive.

After all, *the person I'd need to forgive would be gone.*

The object of my resentment would disappear. In that case, what am I supposed to vent my anger on?

He must not die. He must not escape. No matter what.

An idea strikes me, and I reach out with no hesitation whatsoever. Toward his origin, the bottle Master Elmer held...



"Master Elmer, it's all right, so please—smile the way you always do."

"Huh?"

Just as Elmer made a bewildered sound, Fil took the little bottle from his hand, opened it, and drained it without coming up for air. At the same time, Feldt went completely limp. His body had died.

"Fil!"

"What did you just—?!"

Silence.

With the moon as their only light, Elmer waited for the girl's next words.

After a moment that felt like eternity...Fil's body murmured, weakly, "She—she didn't fight me at all... Why?"

The mind inside the girl was, without a doubt, Feldt.

"....."

When he saw this, Nile stepped forward to hit her—but the shadow that came running up from behind him caught Elmer and Maiza's attention.

Nile prepared to throw a lightning-fast punch at Feldt/Fil, who looked dazed, but just before his fist could connect...*another Fil appeared and slapped Feldt's cheek with all her might.*

"Don't you dare run...after all you did to me, to Master Czes, to

Mistress Sylvie, to Master Elmer—did you really think we would feel better just because you'd died, because you'd been killed, because you'd suffered?! ...Don't take us for fools!"

The attack had been loaded with genuine anger, but the people around them looked more startled than Feldt, who'd taken the actual blow. Fil had just expressed her own will very clearly, but more than that, her mind was still alive and well in another body.

"I see... He took over her body, after all. Well, if it's a question of whether it could happen, I guess it could."

"Let me just say this: I think it could not."

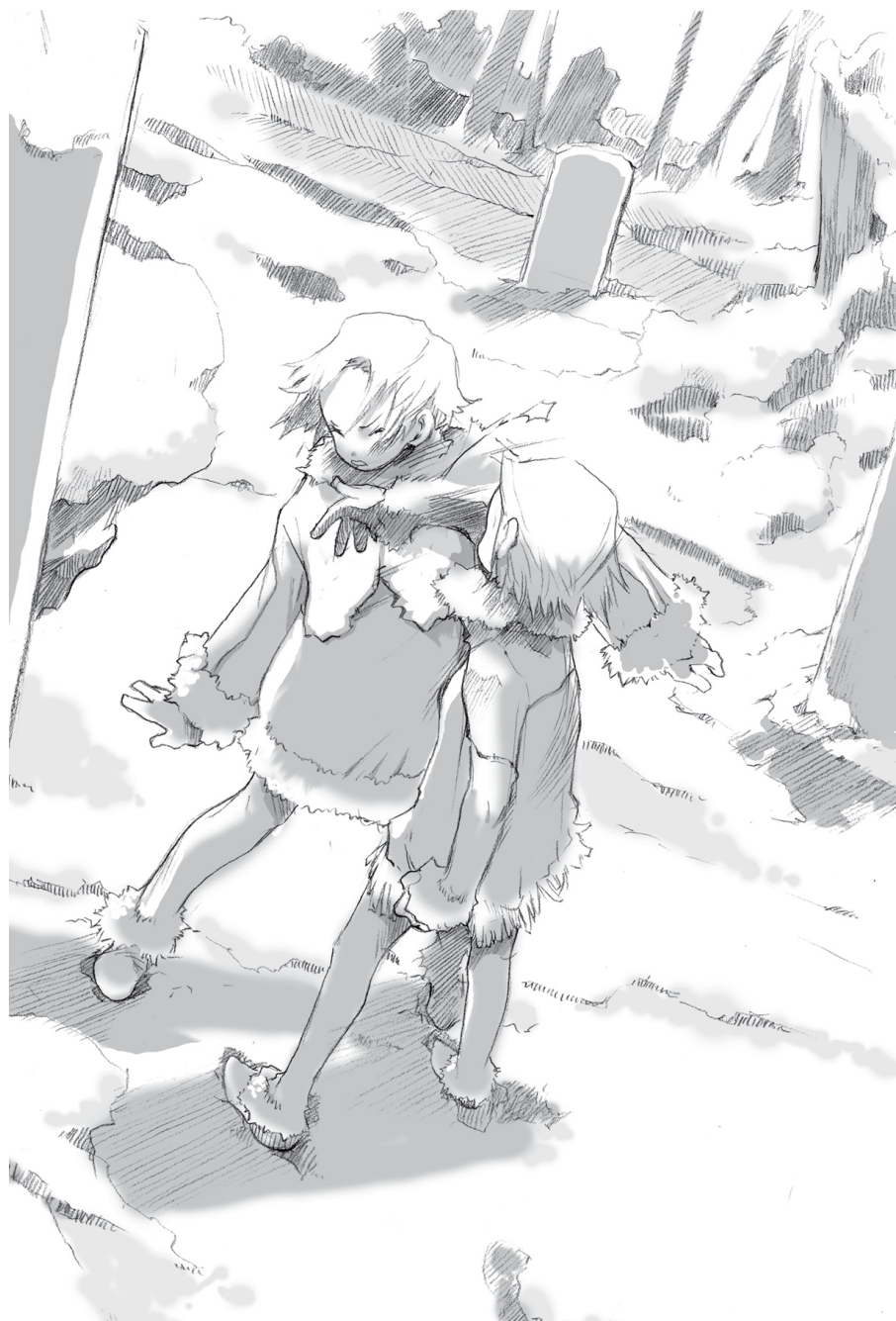
Feldt, who'd been struck, was stunned for a little while. Then, looking at Fil...

"Is it...all right for me to keep living?" he murmured.

"Well... Since his crimes were attempted murder and assault, according to the laws of this country, I don't think he'd be given the death penalty," Maiza muttered to Elmer, smiling in mild amazement.

However, this time, Elmer didn't crack a joke. He walked over to Feldt and smiled at him. "Lucky you. You're not dead."

Smacking Feldt—who was now in a girl's body—on the head, he said:



“Now you can make amends.”

Elmer seemed thoroughly happy. Twisting Fil’s face, Feldt muttered self-deprecatingly, “Even if—even if I survive and atone for my crimes... What on earth am I supposed to do after that? What am I supposed to atone *for*, and why?!”

“You just said so yourself. You want to see the outside world, right?”

“

how many years it takes...”

When he'd said as much, Elmer gently pinched his cheeks and pulled them to either side.

“So, c'mon, give it up and s-m-i-l-e, all right?”

I haven't changed my mind. I still think this man is evil.

He was convinced of that, if nothing else, but...

For this one moment, Feldt decided to give in to the demon's temptation.

He'd realized this man had captured him long ago—from the very moment he had come to the village. He also knew he'd never be able to escape, not for all eternity.

Elmer watched Feldt for a little while longer, and then...

Abruptly, he heaved a great sigh, muttering in disappointment:

“...So why are you crying?”

EPILOGUE
THE CHILDREN
OF BOTTLE

EPILOGUE

THE CHILDREN OF BOTTLE

One week had passed since that night's crazy ruckus, and from the day that dawned over the village, one would have thought that nothing had ever happened.

In the end, no one had seen Feldt since that night, and the castle looked as though its rooms had never been lived in.

The villagers had come to a conclusion that was convenient for them: Angered, the demons had taken Feldt and vanished.

They decided that the five witches had been solidly on the side of the demons, and, with Fil still disgraced for the murder of the village headman, the incident came to a close—

...Or so they thought.

The strangeness began one morning, when the villagers used water from the well.

Some drank it directly, while others ate food that had been prepared with it.

“What's...this? Wh-wh-wh-what is this? *What the hell is this?!*”

The instant the water they'd drawn from the well entered their systems, memories were planted in their heads. Memories of all the abuse they'd heaped on the Fils... However, these memories didn't belong to them, the ones who'd inflicted the violence, but to the girls who'd been their victims.

The fact that the girls had been trying to protect them, their own warped emotions, the perspectives of the victims— All of this had taken root in their minds as their own experiences, their own memories.

For them, the experience was pure suffering. Not only that, but it didn't happen to all the villagers equally: The more they'd hurt her, the deeper the memories sank into their hearts.

“Stop... Go away. We were wrong, so please get out of my head...”

Even if they wanted to atone, they couldn't find the girls

anywhere.

And today, once again, morning came to the village. The “memories” that had indelibly stained their hearts were unchanged, as the plain truth. And so it would be tomorrow as well, and the day after that...

Never forgiven, unable to make amends. All that remained with them was suffering that would never serve any higher purpose.

Forever and ever...



“Elmer, you know... You’ve got a pretty nasty streak.”

“Do I really?”

“Yes. Nasty. I never thought you’d toss Fil’s ‘water’ into the well.”

In the laboratory outside the forest, Czes and Elmer were seated on a modern-looking sofa and talking.

“Not being able to atone is their punishment. Still, to think it was possible to have them drink the water, and then *not* fight for control of their minds... This way, we can clear up the misunderstanding completely. After all, they’ll share all of Fil’s past and memories and experience. Then, when Fil thinks she can forgive them, she can just go back to the village. Although I guess it’s probably best if she does that before old Mr. Bilt dies and the village is set free...”

“But even so—”

“They thought my Christmases and Easters were demonic rituals, too. I’ll feel cruddy unless we get that misunderstanding cleared up properly. See?”

“B-bringing your own grudges into this... You’re a complete jerk.”

At that perfectly natural comeback, Elmer looked away for a moment, then changed the subject as if to distract him.

“By the way, Czes. When are you going to smile for me?”

“Huh?”

“I hear you yelled about it when you were escaping, after they caught you.”

At Elmer’s mean-spirited smile, memories of that night came back to Czes. Then, the moment he understood what he meant, his eyes flew open and he broke out in a cold sweat.

“F-Fiiiiiil!”

“Don’t try to weasel out of it. All right, go on, smile for me. If you need some sort of reason, I’ll produce a tiger from a folding screen for you.”

“You make no sense... Dammit! I absolutely refuse to do it in front

of you! Anywhere else, but not here!”

On seeing Czes flare up like a child, Elmer teased him exactly like Sylvie:

“Aww, Czes. You really are cute.”

“

“What’s the matter? You wanted to see the outside world, didn’t you?”

For a little while, Feldt was silent. Then he looked at Sylvie and, slowly, began to speak.

“Do I really have that right?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m still not sure. When I inherited Fil’s memories, they showed me just how wretched and stunted I was. Or rather, it felt as if they reminded me of something I already knew. Even if Fil does forgive me later on, what should I do out there? Who should I make amends to? I’ve been thinking about it for the past six months, but... In the end, I still haven’t found the answer. Since that’s how I am, do I really have the right to live outside?”

Harboring something like hatred for himself, Feldt lowered his head.

However...when he did so, Sylvie took his face in her hands and forced him to look at her. She wore her usual kind smile, a lone, mismatched thing in the midst of her glamour.

“Don’t look like that. Elmer says it, too, remember? Smiles suit you best.”

“He told me so all through this past half year. But, even so, I can’t find a reason to live. It feels as though, once I’ve seen the outside world, everything I am will end, and...it scares me.”

When she heard that, Sylvie sat down beside Feldt.

“Listen, do you remember what you said that night? You told me I had no goal.”

At her words, Feldt recalled that time vividly. He’d told Sylvie she had no reason for living, and that as a result, she’d never beat him.

“Are you saying that if I have no reason to live, then I don’t have the right to live, or to smile?”

“That was... I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, I’m not talking about what you said then. You’re wrong *now*.”

Still smiling, Sylvie peeked into Feldt’s face, continuing in a voice that the others couldn’t hear.

“I had a goal. Revenge.”

“Huh?”

At those abrupt words, in spite of himself, Feldt looked back at her.

She went on, and her smile held the faintest trace of sadness.

“After Szilard killed the man I loved, for nearly three hundred years, I thought only of getting revenge on him.”

“But you said becoming beautiful was—”

“That was for revenge, too. I figured if my face was completely

different from what it was before, he wouldn't recognize me. I'd get close to him without making him suspicious, and I'd grab his head before he could make a move. That's what I thought. Silly, isn't it? Still... When Maiza told me Szilard was dead, I couldn't believe it."

Her quiet words held a wide range of emotions. Feldt was awed by their force, and all he could do was keep listening in silence.

"It's just as Elmer says. If I'd had some sort of grounds for doing it, I might have bathed in the lifeblood of children. That's how tormented I was. And so...to be honest, it was a shock. It felt as if my reason for living had been snatched away just like that."

When Sylvie had spoken that far, her old smile returned.

"Compared to that, your wish is terribly optimistic, and I'm jealous. Besides, seeing the outside world...? I've never heard of such an overwhelming goal before. 'Outside' is probably far wider than you're imagining. I've been alive for three centuries, and even I could never say I've seen the world."

"....."

At that point, Sylvie spotted a figure running toward them, and she continued, smiling even more brightly than before.

"Getting back to what we were talking about. When that shock hit me, I'd gotten tangled up in a variety of things, and... Frankly, if Maiza and Nile hadn't been there, I don't think I could have endured it."

Feldt frowned.

"And so, while you make amends for your sins and achieve your goal... If you can manage it, pay attention to the people around you, too. Elmer makes that his goal in life."

With that, Sylvie went back to Elmer and the others.

As Feldt tried to ask her what those last words had meant, someone tugged at his hand.

When he turned around, there was Fil, all ready to leave.

"Let's go."

The girl smiled at Feldt. Her eyes were clear, with no hidden motives. As if drawn by that smile, Feldt stood up—and before he knew it, he'd nodded.

"Smiles are magic. There's no doubt about it."

"Elmer's saying dumb stuff again."

"No, no, no, I mean it! Smiles give me strength. Listen, of all the emotional expressions built into human DNA, smiles are memories engraved in a positive direction. People can smile naturally from the moment they're born..."

"It's the same with crying and getting mad, though."

"...Well, hang on now. The 'waaaah!' that newborns do is actually

a laugh, you know. It's like, 'Horror! Infant Explodes with Laughter'... Or, no, maybe not 'Horror!' 'Bizarre!' might be better."

"Let me just say this: Be silent."

Elmer tried to stand his ground even then, but seeing that the girls were ready, he stopped talking...and began to walk outside, into the sunlight.



To be completely honest, somewhere in my heart, I may have feared the outside world.

Since the night I gave Feldt one of my bodies, no matter how I tried, I hadn't managed to find an opportunity to smile. When we were abruptly told we'd be able to go "outside," I actually felt uneasy before I felt happy.

True, I had wished to see the outside world. However, would I—the self who, up until now, had known nothing but this forest—be able to survive out there?

"That forest is your glass bottle; it is your flask. You girls can't leave it and live. That is what you are..."

I remember my past clearly now. For that very reason, the words of the alchemist who created me keep echoing in my mind. Apparently he was Master Bilt's grandfather, but in the end, I realized I didn't even know his name, and it made me feel something indescribable.

When I told Master Elmer about that unease, he smiled at me and said, "Oh, is that all? You and Feldt haven't even left the glass bottle yet."

Then Master Elmer stopped smiling for a moment, and as he spoke, his face grew a little serious.

"It's possible that everybody's a homunculus. If they leave their flasks or glass bottles—the world they're able to perceive—they can't live. That said, it's possible to expand the flask itself as far as you want... Let's see. How should I put it? I don't know any better examples. Huey's really good at making up pseudo-philosophical lines like these, but..."

Huey. That name came up from time to time, when Master Elmer and the others talked. I was a little curious and asked about him.

"Hmm. If you want to find out about him, it would be best if you met him in person, but... Yeah, if you go 'outside' someday, I bet you'll run into each other. Anyway, they say the best way to stretch

glass out and expand it is to make it hot. That cold expression of yours really isn't going to cut it, y'know."

On hearing that, I began to feel, vaguely, like leaving the forest. I thought this sort of change of heart came suddenly, like a jolt of electricity, but apparently it wasn't quite that easy. Over these past six months, thanks to Master Elmer and the others, I felt as though I'd managed to expand my hopes for the outside world, little by little.

Next time, I'd smile for Master Elmer for sure.

I wanted to smile an even better smile than he did, and to laugh out loud.

In order to make that happen, I think I'll see the world. I'll see many, many more things than Master Elmer has. I may experience lots of unpleasant things, too, but I'll get strong enough to smile in spite of it.

I'll go around with Feldt and look at everything. I can't completely forgive him yet, but I'll travel all over with him, and someday, I'll make him smile.

Then we'll smile for Master Elmer together.

If we do, I'm sure Master Elmer will smile back at us... Because I can probably make Master Elmer smile, too. Not just him, either; all sorts of other people...

When I thought about that time, I started to look forward to seeing the outside world, just a little.



"Aww... In the end, I only taught Fil about a handful of holidays."

Stopping in front of the open door to the outside, Elmer thought back over his days in the castle.

"To be honest, I wanted to teach the Fils about Valentine's Day in February. We'd all make homemade chocolate together, et cetera. It's just that we wouldn't have been able to make good chocolate with the facilities in that castle, so I decided not to."

At Elmer's comment, Nile quizzically spoke up. "Chocolate? What does chocolate have to do with Valentine's Day?"

"The Valentine's-Day-and-chocolate thing was a campaign a Japanese chocolatier dreamed up to double their sales: 'If a girl gives a guy chocolate, their love will become mutual.'"

"But that's just a sales promotion. What about it is a holiday?"

Elmer responded to Sylvie's question by launching into a vehement rebuttal.

"You're not giving it enough credit. Whoever came up with that

holiday was a genius. No matter what shape it took, it soared past ‘popular’ and became culture. Candy shops and artists add a variety of personal touches to it, then send it out into the world: It’s a developing culture. In other words, it’s a holiday that keeps on evolving! They say most holidays were originally created out of a desire for abundant harvests, for wealth. Why can’t a chocolate shop start a holiday out of a desire to do good business?! What’s even more awesome is that they made *another* holiday called White Day, where guys return the favor! I just love that energy.”

On hearing that, Maiza broke in as if he’d remembered something.

“I hear they’ve recently been running Valentine’s Day chocolate campaigns in New York as well. They’re probably trying to capitalize on Japan’s sales.”

“Right; Miria and Ennis were all excited about it when we called last year.”

Czes chimed in, and Elmer’s eyes sparkled even brighter.

“Really? I see! So the Japanese imported Christmas, and now they’ve exported Valentine’s Day!”

“No...all they’ve exported is the chocolate custom. Valentine’s Day itself already existed...”

Laughing off Maiza’s comeback as if to say *Don’t worry about that*, Elmer took a big step through the door. As the sunlight streamed down over him, he turned and called to Maiza and the others still inside. Just then, he saw the girls emerge from the depths of the room.

“As a matter of fact, that’s exactly the kind of holiday I want Fil and Feldt to participate in. That village doesn’t have any local customs, so from now on, you’ll just have to become the type of people that create them... Well, that’s all I meant.”

Focusing on the five girls following him, Elmer gave them his usual smile.

It was almost as if it were his default expression.

Then, brightening his countenance even further, he spoke to Fil and Feldt.

“This is more of a sealed glass bottle than a flask. Absolutely anything can be born in here, just the way you were. Good things and bad things alike.”

At that, Elmer spun around and spread his arms wide, with the sun at his back.

“Welcome to our bottle!”



1771

On the Atlantic Ocean

In the darkness

In response to the demon's question, Elmer spoke slowly.

"I've made up my mind, demon."

< That was fast. >

The voice in his mind sounded surprised.

Then, with no hesitation, Elmer named the power he wanted.

"Listen, demon. *I want to see you smile.*"

< ?! >

"Smile, all right? Laugh from the bottom of your heart, at the top of your lungs, like you're having fun, like you're overjoyed. Tell me how you smile, you who are called a demon, and what makes you really and truly happy."

He could sense that the demon's heart was unsettled. At that point, Elmer was already satisfied.

"I'm sure your smile will give me strength."

The clearly flustered demon was gazing at him.

< ...That's a problem. My apologies. I underestimated you. >

The face of the man people called a demon gradually began to twist, and the world was on the verge of being completely enveloped in darkness once more.

< I've lived several thousand years as a demon who grants human desires...but this is the first time I've ever encountered such a difficult wish. >

Just before the world was locked in darkness, Elmer reached out and caught the demon's arm, which had begun to warp, in a firm grip.

"Uh-uh, don't you run. Don't lie, either. I'm not a believer in smiles for nothing. I'll see through a fake smile right away."

At Elmer's stern words, the demon averted his eyes uncomfortably. When he saw it, Elmer grinned.

"Say, demon, I've got a favor to ask. If that wish is a hard one, depending on the conditions, I'll give you some time."

< Conditions? >

"You know Maiza, right? He's the guy who summoned you."

< Yes, I remember. >

"Well, his kid brother died. It must've been a terrible shock. He

might be feeling rage, or sadness—or maybe despair.”

< Perhaps. >

“So, listen, would you look out for him? I’ll try to hunt up old Szilard, so you stick close to Maiza and help him out with stuff. As a human, not a demon. I mean, you already look human anyway. No problem there, right?”

<

2003
New York
Alveare

I tell you, this place has great food... Although the smell of honey is just a bit too strong.

So that's the end of the tale of Mr. Happy Ending.

Did he ever get to see the demon smile? —I don't know.

That's why I stopped in here, to find out. I heard a sketchy rumor that the demon's at this restaurant.

...What gives? Your eyes just lit up.

You want to meet them? Both the demon and Elmer? Seriously?

Ha-ha, you guys really are weirdos.

Me? My name's—Fil Nibiru, previously male. I hope we run into each other again.

Until then, I'll be praying that all your days are happy ones.

If you do see Happy Ending, say hi to him for me.

Tell him I may not have atoned for my crimes yet, but we're happy now.

Other folks might get mad, but I think that'll make him happier than anything.

That's about the only way I can pay him back, see.

Isaac and Miria, huh? Yeah, I'll remember.

Later, then. Let's meet up at this honey-coated place again someday.

I hope you two get a happy ending—no, a happy eternity...

Baccano! 2001—*The End*

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's Narita, for the first time in forever. To my first-time readers, it's great to meet you—but this book is actually part of a series called *Baccano!*, so if this is the first time we've met, you'll probably want to read the earlier volumes, too.

...And so, before I knew it, with this book the *Baccano!* series reached five volumes. This is entirely thanks to you, the readers, and all other interested parties. In exchange, I'm spending my days writing at a snail's pace, just lying around, going to see movies and boxing matches, yet never failing to show up for things like the Dengeki Bunko year-end party. A while back, in *Doraemon*, there was talk of a "Loafer Appreciation Day," and when, in connection with that, I mentioned my enthusiasm to my friend—"Every day is Loafer Appreciation Day!"—he got mad at me: "Get it together. Just...get it together." It's nice to have friends who'll get mad at you.

All right: This *Baccano!* was abruptly set in the twenty-first century, but as a matter of fact, I had the bare-bones concept for the story before I started work on Volume 2. Back then, Czes didn't exist yet, and the only ones at the center of the story were the two immortals Maiza and Elmer. However, this time, "since I had the opportunity" (like that one guy who opened a certain red door), I decided I'd include all the immortals who were alive at that point in time. —The problem being that I made that decision after I'd turned in the final manuscript.

Partly as a result, I had characters who haven't appeared in the main story yet show up in the color pages as guests. Someday I'd like to write a story that puts them in the spotlight. As a rule, the color illustrations are finished first, and then I come up with text that goes with the pictures, but because of the situation, this time around I finished the text first, and I caused Mr. Enami and my editor, Mr. Suzuki, a lot of trouble over the incomprehensible reason, "since we've got the opportunity." ...For which I'm very sorry.

I took this chance to internally designate "since I've got the opportunity" as a diabolical phrase. What do you think? Good move?

Well, it's weird for me to say this personally, but it feels like this turned into a rather unconventional *Baccano!* book. In terms of the

number of characters, the setting, and the era, it's far removed from the previous installments. I don't know what people are going to think of it, but I hope you'll take it as another possible format for *Baccano!* I'd like to keep branching out in various directions, and I'm thoroughly disgusted by my own attempt at being "everybody's friend," but please do stick with me anyway.

In the future, I'll write more standalone volumes, and next...it's very likely I'll be releasing a book that's neither *Baccano!* nor *Bowwow*. I'm hoping I'll also get to release *Baccano! 1933* this summer. (Actually, the 1933 project was on the table this time as well, but it's set in summer, so we decided, "Since we've got the opportunity, let's release it in summer," and the 2001 project is the one that got through.)

Since the material I've got scheduled for next time is what it is, when I told him about it, Suzuhito Yasuda (who's helping me out on *Bowwow*) was speechless for about three seconds, and my editor griped at me at the pub: "All the projects you come up with are wacko." Still, I'll work hard to sublimate that material into entertainment, so please continue to bear with me.

*Everything from this point on is thank-yous.

Once again, this work came together with the help of all sorts of people.

To Chief Editor Suzuki and the people at Media Works.

To the copy editors, who always, always check my manuscripts for me, and to the designers, who made the book look good.

To my family, friends, acquaintances, and everyone in S City, to whom I'm indebted for all sorts of things.

To the Dengeki authors and illustrators who helped me out at the year-end party and elsewhere.

To the great Katsumi Enami, who used his outstanding skill with a pen to depict places and characters brilliantly, even though the atmosphere was completely different from everything that had come before it.

And to everyone who read this book from yours truly, who's just made it into his second year as an author.

Everyone mentioned above has my deepest gratitude. Thank you very much.

December 2003, at my place

Thinking, *I'd really like to be watching or listening to something right now, but once I finish writing this, I have to head straight over to the editorial department, so there's no time to watch or listen to anything—* And right as I wrote that, I kid you not, the phone rang, and it was the editorial department...

Ryohgo Narita